FourFourTwo

EURO 2024 IS HERE!

Why the Three Lions are determined to go all the way this summer



EXTRA 52-PAGE MAG
EURO 2024 GUIDE



WELCOME

For the first time in six years, we have a tournament taking place in the summer, without any restrictions on attendances. Coupled with the fact it's being held in Germany, one of the great football nations, and it all means that Euro 2024 should be fantastic.

It feels like an open tournament, with England, France and Portugal all having a great chance of glory. Never write off the Germans, either, especially on home soil.

Scotland showed in qualification that they're not to be underestimated and will hope to get out of their group for the first time in their history at a major tournament. In this issue, we focus on both home nations involved at the Euros, cast our eye over the hosts and sit down to chat with Portugal and Manchester United defender Diogo Dalot. Euro 2012 winner Juan Mata also answers your questions about his career, including scoring in the final.

If that isn't enough, we have a full 52-page guide to all 24 competing teams, plus the lowdown on who could win the Golden Boot. We have a giant wallchart, too, letting you follow the tournament as it goes on.

After you have read this issue of *FourFourTwo*, you'll be well and truly ready for Euro 2024. Enjoy the mag and the tournament.



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SCAN TO SIGN UP FOR OUR NEWSLETTER

5 THINGS YOU'LL LEARN INSIDE

1. Which England boss was told he should quit and become a train driver
2. Which WAG danced on a table, singing *I Will Survive* in Baden-Baden
3. Which key German figure was once branded 'the root of evil'
4. Which current League Two club played a game against Japan in 1971
5. Which team went on a night out to watch a panda playing a trumpet

FourFourTwo

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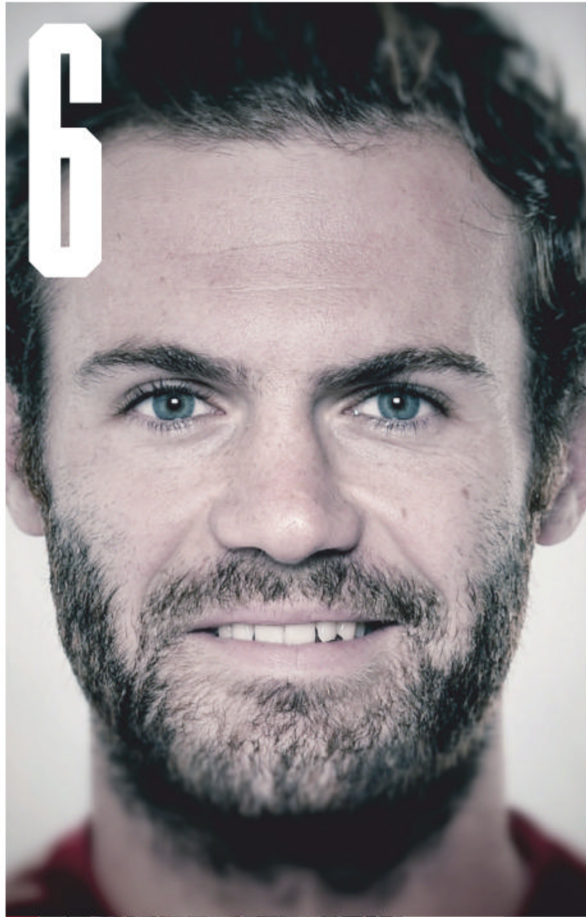






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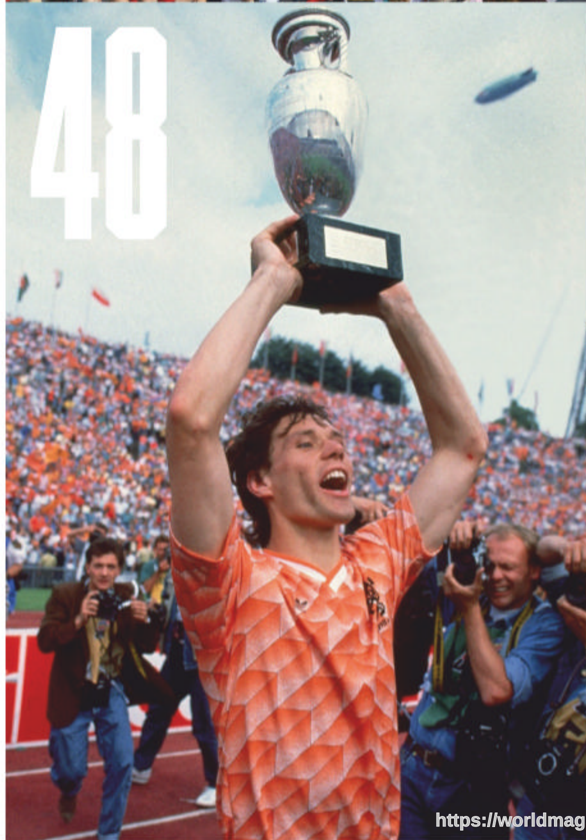


BRICKY THE MASCOT



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YOU ASK THE QUESTIONS

Interview Dani Gil

"Scoring in the Euro 2012 Final will forever stay in my memory – victory closed the beautiful story of a whole generation"

JUAN MATA

When Juan Mata slid home a pass from Fernando Torres in the 88th minute of the Euro 2012 Final, he was putting the full stop on history.

Mata's goal sealed Spain's 4-0 win over Italy in Kyiv – the biggest victory ever in a European Championship final – to make them the first team to retain the trophy. After La Roja triumphed at Euro 2008, Mata was also part of the squad that won the 2010 World Cup, in a remarkable era of dominance.

Now 36, he looks back on his goal against Italy as a career highlight, and it came just six weeks after he'd lifted the Champions League with Chelsea. Not a bad summer, all told. Yet despite those achievements, he had never won a domestic league title until last year – and then he bagged two within six months, with Galatasaray in Turkey, then Vissel Kobe in Japan, before his January exit made him a free agent.

Mata also set up the Common Goal movement in 2017, encouraging players and coaches to pledge at least one per cent of their salary to support charities around the world. It's helped to earn Mata a deserved reputation as football's Mr Nice Guy.

"I guess it's better they say that than anything negative!" he says, smiling, and begins to answer your questions...

Did you ever see your father play for Real Burgos or any of his other clubs?
Raquel Ferron, Burgos
I have a few live memories, but many on video. He'd record his games; we'd watch them at home on occasions. He was a left-footed winger who scored a lot of goals. My sister and I were born in Burgos when he played there, then we went to Salamanca – I remember some of his training sessions and matches there – and finally Asturias, where I grew up. A lot of my childhood memories, I associate with my sister. We used anything we could find as a ball and she always played goalkeeper.

Growing up, other than your father, which player inspired you the most?
Tapiwa Winston Muza, via X
I really liked Pablo Aimar – he was elegance personified. He wasn't tall, nor extremely quick, but he understood the game. Juan Roman Riquelme had an impact on me, and I also had a lot of fun watching Zinedine Zidane and Ronaldinho.

How did your move to Real Madrid as a teenager come about?
Gonzalo Camarero, Alcobendas
After I played in a tournament with the Asturian regional team, there were some scouts who came to talk to my father. They offered to show us the school in Madrid where I would study. It wasn't easy for a 15-year-old boy to leave his bubble, but my family and I understood it was an opportunity I couldn't let pass. I was excited and scared in equal parts. When I was in the youth teams at Oviedo, I'd played against Real Madrid and Barcelona, and when I saw those shirts it seemed as if their players were faster, taller and better looking. I wanted to test myself, to see if I could be at that level.



Did you get to know the Galacticos during your time at Real Madrid?
Diego Harper, Croydon
I travelled to a Champions League match against Dynamo Kyiv, when Fabio Capello called me up. Iker Casillas, Ronaldo, Ruud van Nistelrooy and David Beckham were there – David gave me his shirt. Zinedine Zidane was there, too. Just being able to train with them was special. I was close to making my debut, but the circumstances didn't work out. I was finishing my contract, Valencia called me and it was a good opportunity.

How good was your time at Valencia?
Giannis Papoulias, via Instagram
I entered a professional dressing room with people who'd been in the game for many years, some with prestigious careers in the Spanish national team. Arriving at 19 was like a university master's degree. My first season ended with my first trophy: the Copa del Rey. I scored two goals in the semi-finals against Barcelona, and another in the final against Getafe. Very happy times.

Just how good was that Valencia team, featuring yourself, David Silva, David Silva, Ever Banega, Joaquin...?
Nathan Gent, via X
We enjoyed it like crazy. Villa was great from the start – he's also Asturian and he helped me a lot. Alongside them, I tried to improve every day. The goals and assists that we scored were a consequence of the understanding we had, and the fun we had.

You played under Ronald Koeman and Unai Emery at Valencia. How did they compare?
Denis Alferez, Sagunto
Koeman gave me the first chance, so for that I'll be eternally grateful. Under Emery, I played a lot of games and he made me feel important. Each had ▸



CLUBS
2006-07 Real Madrid Castilla
2007-11 Valencia
2011-14 Chelsea
2014-22 Manchester United
2022-23 Galatasaray
2023-24 Vissel Kobe

COUNTRY
2009-16 Spain

his own way of coaching, but both were positive for my career. We finished third behind Real Madrid and Barcelona, which was very positive. Human nature always wants more, and some people asked us to win the league, but it was a tremendously good period in the club's history. I hope it will soon return to that level.

Were you surprised when Vicente del Bosque called you up for the national team for the first time in 2008?
Mateo Riba, Malaga
I was in the shower after training at Mestalla and [Valencia general manager] Voro told me I was on the list. "Which list?" I said, because I was playing regularly for the under-21s at the time. "The senior team," he replied. David Villa and others were there and we hugged each other. I was 20 and it all happened very quickly.

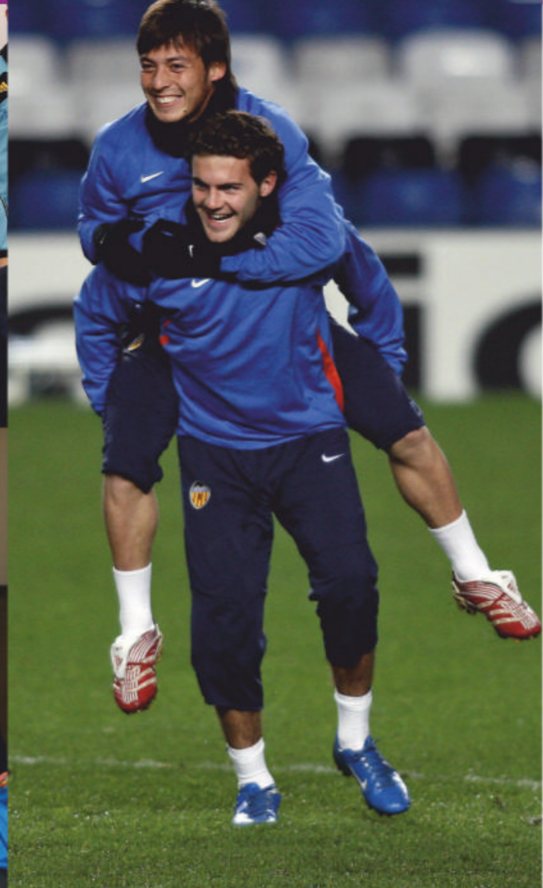
You played just 20 minutes in Spain's 2010 World Cup triumph, in a win over Honduras. Was that frustrating?
Sheila Arriaga, Finsbury Park
One of the best things that happened to me was the opportunity to win a World Cup and later a European Championship, although the negative thing is that it was very difficult to play. At 21 or 22, with people like Xavi and Andres Iniesta there – some of the best players in history – it was almost impossible. But it pays to have lived in that generation, because they made me a better player.

How was the dressing room in the run-up to the 2010 World Cup final?
Maddie Grant, Bradford
The dressing room was more nervous on the night against Chile in the group stage, because if we hadn't won that game, we were eliminated. That's when I saw fear. Not getting out of the group stage would have been a failure. In the run-up to the final, there was tension – it was impossible to take a nap – but I saw the team with confidence that came from beating Germany in the semi-finals. We knew we were capable of beating anyone.

What do you remember of the moment when Andres Iniesta won the World Cup for Spain?
Leighton Carr, Peterborough
When he scored, those on the pitch and those of us on the bench all ran the fastest 100 metres in history, beating Usain Bolt's record! [*Laughs*] It was total ecstasy. We were shouting in that corner of the pitch, hugging each other, but all around us you could hear silence because we were in the Dutch fans' area. Between the goal and the end of the game, I asked a ballboy to give me a ball as a souvenir. He told me he couldn't give it to me as the game wasn't over yet, but I took it out of his hands and tucked it under my shirt. Now I have it at home.







Clockwise from right
Juan just above resists giving Del Bosque the bunny ears; Silva + Mata was a delightful combo at Valencia; lifting two of the biggest trophies around during a heady six weeks in 2012... but nothing compares to winning the World Cup



How did it feel to be a world champion with Spain?
Jim Presswell, via Facebook
One word comes to mind: history. Spain had never won a World Cup before and we weren't the favourites, so we didn't have the pressure of other teams. Winning it was the ultimate expression of happiness. It was an explosion of feelings. I remember that after Howard Webb signalled the end of the game, Pepe Reina said, "What a mess we've made". That was a good summary. [*Smiles*] It was a 48-hour day after that – first in South Africa, then in Madrid, and later for each of us in our home towns. Nobody slept on the plane. Pepe [Reina] was the king of the party, with drinks in his hand and a loudspeaker. In Madrid we had the official visit to the royal family and the official dinner. Those of us who made it to the second night were zombies!

Was it hard to go back to play for Spain's under-21s again in 2011?
Omar Botero, Toledo
It was consensual. I spoke to Fernando Hierro, who was the federation's sporting director, and there was the possibility of helping the under-21s to win the European Championship. I didn't hesitate; nor did Javi Martínez. We saw it as an opportunity to win another title, and we did.

How close were you to joining Arsenal in 2011?
Jack Beresford, via X
Cesc Fabregas left for Barcelona and Arsene Wenger wanted to replace him with a similar profile in midfield. There was contact, but it didn't materialise.

You were also linked with Liverpool and both Manchester clubs in 2011, so what made you opt for Chelsea?
Charlie Jenkins, Brentford
Everyone knows what Chelsea means in the modern era: great players. After

four years at Valencia, I wanted a change of culture, country and language, and the club needed to find a way out of their financial problems. It was a deal that suited all parties. [*FFT*: Fernando Torres was at Chelsea at the time – did he speak to you?] He did. He called me during a pre-season I was doing in Asia and said, "I know they want you, the coach has spoken to me, you're going to be very good, we need a player like you, you're going to play, you're going to make a difference..." He acted as an agent! [*Smiles*] I had a lot of affection and respect for him, so I let him advise me. He and his family helped me a lot in London. We have a great relationship.

How did you find your transition to the Premier League? Did you have any difficulties adapting at first?
George Derbyshire, via X
Not at all. I felt tremendous confidence from the coach, Andre Villas-Boas, and from my team-mates. The Premier League is a more physical league, but if you have the ability to read spaces, you can stand out. It was more of a cultural change – the fans' unconditional support. For footballers, maybe it's easier to live in England than in Spain because you don't feel so much pressure. It's calmer. Later, in my first or second season at Manchester United, we ended the season badly and it was explained to me that we had to do a lap of honour. I was surprised, thinking that it didn't make much sense after finishing sixth. But when we did the lap, the fans cheered us more and more. I started to get embarrassed, but the reaction of the crowd was to erase the bad results and focus on the future.

What was it like to win the Champions League in your first season at Chelsea? Unexpected?
Lucie Collins, Guildford
Absolutely. In the last 16, we lost 3-1 in the first leg at Napoli and Villas-Boas was sacked; two weeks later we won 4-1 in London. The semi-finals against Barça could also be the subject of a book: John Terry's sending off, Lionel Messi's missed penalty... it was a miracle. Then the final against Bayern was in Munich, which seemed impossible. [*FFT*: Do you think some players saw it as their last chance to win it?] No doubt about it. Didier Drogba said it wasn't easy to reach a Champions League final at his age. John Terry missed it because he was sent off at Camp Nou, but it was a culmination of their careers – they deserved it for everything they'd given not just to Chelsea but to football.

What were you thinking when you took the corner that Didier Drogba headed in to equalise in the 2012 Champions League Final?
Okiria John Etesot, via Facebook
I said to myself, "Get the ball up and put it where there's people – don't let it fall short". Luckily I found Drogba. In that Champions League we had been lucky during several moments in the knockout stages and I was convinced we were going to have a chance in the final as well. I think it was written.

How did you feel when you missed Chelsea's first penalty in the Champions League final shoot-out?
Aiden Hart, Esher
I just wanted Bayern people to miss after that. For three penalties, they didn't. I didn't want to lose because of that penalty. It's funny, because our goalkeeping coach told me that Manuel Neuer would go to the left when a left-footed player took a penalty and I was planning to listen to him and put it to his right, but at the last minute I had the feeling Neuer would go to that side and I changed my mind. That's why I missed. [*FFT*: Did you buy Cech a drink after his two saves rescued you?] He's invited for life to whatever he wants! [*Laughs*]

"THE BALL BOY SAID I COULDN'T HAVE THE BALL AS A SOUVENIR. I TOOK IT ANYWAY"

You played only three minutes at Euro 2012, but that included coming off the bench to score in the final. Did that feel extra special?
'Hmingthangsang', via Instagram
Of course, because it allowed me to participate directly in a unique celebration. It'll forever remain in my memory. I only played a few minutes, but I was able to make the most of it. The final was Spain's best game at that European Championship. Beating Italy 4-0 was the icing on the cake and closed the beautiful story of a whole generation, which made history by winning so much and playing that way.

You were Chelsea's player of the year in your first two seasons – was that the best form of your career?
Jay Webb, Leatherhead
In terms of numbers, no doubt. For a footballer to be at his best, not only do they have to be at their best, but the team has to be at its best. At Chelsea, that happened. Those were the two years I enjoyed the most.

How did winning the 2013 Europa League Final against Benfica feel?
Samuel Gill, Redhill
Like glory. That final was also marked by a corner towards the end of the game, in which I assisted Branislav Ivanovic. When I went to take it, the one a year earlier in Munich came to mind. It was history repeating itself.

Your link-up play with Eden Hazard was awesome. Who else in your career did you have that affinity with on the pitch?
Luke Juniper, via Facebook
I sent Eden a message when he announced his retirement, but I didn't tell him enough and I want to take ▸





this opportunity. He was a unique player – one of the players I enjoyed playing with the most. He had the ability to bring the ball back to you, to link up at the highest level, and to improve every play. I just supported his play, because he had the ability to get past two or three opponents and finish. He made the difference in that Chelsea team. He dominated the Premier League for a few years. Then, at Real Madrid, he never reached the same level. Which other players did I have affinity with? At Valencia, with Villa and Silva; at Chelsea, also with Oscar; at Manchester United, at first with Robin van Persie or Wayne Rooney, then later with Anthony Martial – a very talented player – and in recent years, although we didn't play together as much as we would have liked, Bruno Fernandes. We understood each other very well. In the national team, it was with Iniesta.

The returning Jose Mourinho relegated you to the bench after you had won back-to-back player of the year awards at Chelsea. Did he give any explanation?
Chris Sergeant, via Instagram
No. I suffered an injury in pre-season and when I came back, Mourinho already had his team. It was always for football reasons. I understood that the way I played didn't fit in with his idea. It was a difficult moment in my career, because I went from enjoying it to the maximum to being relegated to another role. [*FFT*: Did you speak to him about it?] On that occasion it didn't happen, although it's normal for a player to ask for explanations: "What am I doing wrong? Why don't I play more?" In our case there wasn't much communication, neither from Mourinho nor from me. It wasn't a long time – just a few months until Manchester United arrived in the winter transfer window. However, one of the things I'm most proud of is that, when we met again in Manchester years later, I was able to stay at Old Trafford and be important for Mourinho there. We didn't speak then about what happened at Chelsea; we talked about the present, about Spanish football, about London, but not about that. In fact, we got to have a relationship – a relationship that we still have – which was much closer than in our time together at Chelsea.

Did you really want to leave Chelsea to join Manchester United?
Alzi, via X
Yes, because I saw that I didn't have and wasn't going to get the minutes that I was sure I would have in Manchester. When a club like Manchester United comes knocking on your door, it's difficult to say no. Old Trafford was different. It has a great history, and the feeling of belonging to that club is a beautiful thing. There are few chosen clubs but Manchester United are one of them.







Clockwise from above
Europa joy, as observed by Roy Hodgson; one of Moyes and Mata would still be there eight years later; equalising in an FA Cup final deserves a great goal celebration; Van Gaal – top bloke; a league champion at last, in Turkey last year

HIGHS & LOWS

HIGH: 2010
Part of the Spain squad that wins the World Cup in South Africa

HIGH: 2012
Scores in Euros final, just weeks after Champions League glory

LOW: 2013
Surprisingly benched by returning boss Jose Mourinho at Chelsea

HIGH: 2016
Nets key equaliser for Manchester United in FA Cup final at Wembley

What happened to Spain at the 2014 World Cup, to fall from being world champions to going out in the group stage? Was it disappointing not to start the crucial game against Chile after the 5-1 loss to the Netherlands?
Mohd Nasri, via Facebook
That tournament was a huge disappointment because we still felt we could compete to win. We were the reigning champions and more or less the same generation. We didn't achieve the level we expected, but we came up against great rivals like the Netherlands and Chile. Between 2012 and 2014, I had to manage the feeling of being so important in my club teams and then having another role in the national team. There was so much competition – it was difficult. I scored a goal in the last group game against Australia, and even though we were already eliminated, it was nice to make my mark.

What was it like to work with Louis van Gaal at Manchester United?
Alex Lawson, Cheadle
On a personal level, fantastic. Even though he has that tough, inflexible facade, he has a human side to him and was very emotional when he spoke to you alone about football or personal matters. He had a sensitivity that I was surprised about, for the better. He played a game of dominating the ball, which suited me, but it wasn't easy because we only managed to win the FA Cup and he didn't go on. [*FFT*: Do you have any particular memories of working with him?] When he arrived, we went to Los Angeles for pre-season. During the camp he called us all, one by one, to an office he had in the hotel. He was sitting there with a glass of wine and Ryan Giggs next to him. Van Gaal was imposing because he spoke very close to you. "Introduce yourself," he said. I didn't understand what he meant, so I said "My name is Juan Mata, I'm 26 years old..." He replied, "No, no... as a person, what do you like? What excites you?" We started talking about family and ended up talking about football, his preferences and where he saw me.

How did it feel to score in Manchester United's FA Cup final victory over Crystal Palace?
Alice Stone, Salford
It was a goal that put us back in the game, because we were losing. It was the famous afternoon of Alan Pardew's little dance. Then we won with a great goal from Jesse Lingard. When you're in England, you realise how important that competition is. I had already won one with Chelsea and it was fantastic to do it with Manchester United, too.



"WHEN ZLATAN CAME TO UNITED, THE FIRST THING HE SAID WAS, 'GOD HAS ARRIVED'"

Honestly, what was your first thought when you learned that Jose Mourinho was going to become Manchester United's manager?
Nyesiga Owen, via Facebook
Obviously the people around me were worried. My grandfather was asking me what was going to happen. My friends were also writing to me and telling me how I wasn't leaving. I wanted to wait, work as usual with the same attitude, and see what role I had. Luckily I started to play, to feel important, to enjoy myself and to have a closer relationship with both Mourinho and my team-mates.

Was there ever truly a point where you thought Manchester United could win the Premier League during your time at the club?
Oliver Pearson, Warrington
There was one season when we were close. We had a Manchester derby at Old Trafford and if we had won, we would have got very close, but we lost. That's when our chances slipped away. Every season I was hopeful we could compete for the Premier League – we were signing big players and I thought we had a chance – but it never materialised. It was doubly frustrating that you didn't do it and that your city rivals did.



Did you ever regret the move to Manchester United?
'Maverick__burns', via Instagram
I would have regretted not taking the opportunity to play for United.

Who was the biggest character in the dressing room: Zlatan Ibrahimovic or Paul Pogba?
Tim Clark, Buxton
They were two players with a lot of charisma. I had more of a relationship with Paul because we spent more time together, but Zlatan was fun. When he first arrived in the Carrington dressing room, there were a few players around and the first thing he said was, "God has arrived". [*Laughs*] People were freaking out, but after 10 seconds he started laughing and it was just a joke. It may sound arrogant, but that's the way he is. [*FFT*: As a senior player, did you ever give Pogba advice?] We had a lot of conversations about football. He was a fantastic guy: cheerful and supportive, with a very positive aura about him. Everything that's happened to him lately makes me sad. He has absolutely everything as a footballer.

How important was it to win the 2017 Europa League Final, following the terrorist attack in Manchester that week?
Lucas Read, Rochdale
It was very emotional, especially to try to brighten the lives of many people in Manchester after that tragedy. It was a special night, against a very strong Ajax team.

What was your hardest moment at Manchester United?
Dylan James, Newport
On a personal level, the worst moment was the death of my mother and those recurring trips to Spain. It coincided with the period when I started to play less, under Ole Gunnar Solskjaer. Those last two years were tough. Ole's a good person; many times I was frustrated with him because I felt I didn't get the minutes I deserved, but I knew his decisions were football decisions. He always tried to be fair, even though it's difficult to be fair when you're a coach.

In your later years at Old Trafford, why didn't you move to another club in order to play more regularly?
Mark Bailey, via Facebook
I had the opportunity to move to other English clubs, but after so many years at the club, it would have hurt me to leave if United then won the Premier League. I didn't want to miss that moment. I dreamed of celebrating a league title at Old Trafford.

Were you excited when Cristiano Ronaldo returned, and surprised when it didn't go as well as hoped?
Clara Doyle, Northwich
When United signed Cristiano, I thought we could win the Premier League again. He had such high standards that he could drag the rest with him. I always thought that when it came to the 80th minute of a game, the ball had to go to him to win. He always appeared in decisive moments. However, circumstances around him prevented him from getting more quality minutes in his second season. I connected with Cristiano, during many conversations. He's a much closer person than people imagine.

How did you react to the atmosphere at Galatasaray games after signing?
Ege Cevik, via Instagram
Just go to a derby against Fenerbahce and listen every time the opposing team has the ball. It's a thunderous noise. It's different to the atmosphere in England: the noise and the pressure is constant. Everything is exacerbated. One of the best things about being a footballer is being able to travel and live in places that I wouldn't have been able to live in if it wasn't for this profession. Wearing the shirt of the biggest club in Turkey made me feel proud. We also won the league – my first domestic league title.

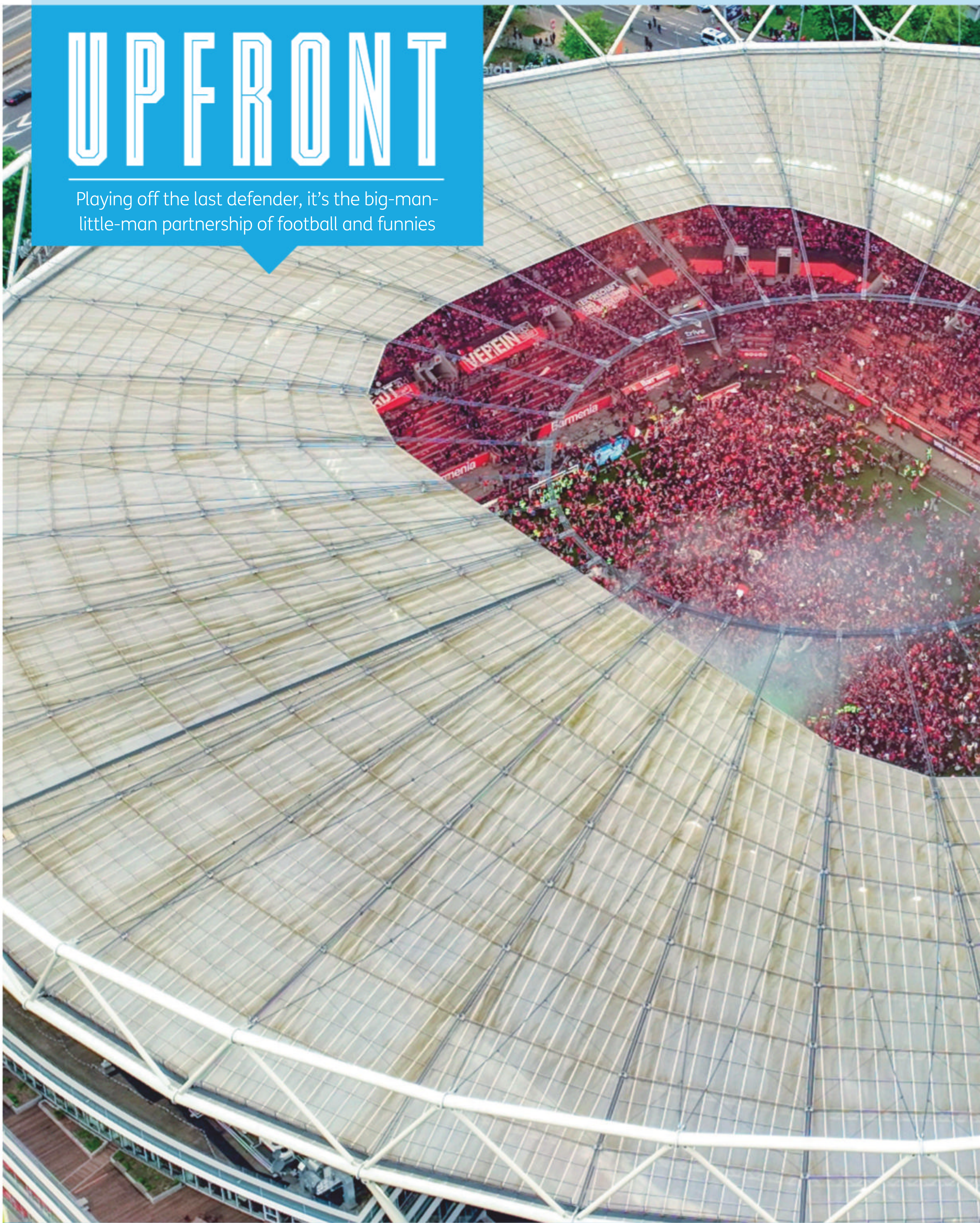
Was Andres Iniesta a factor in your decision to join Vissel Kobe in the J.League last year?
@kapisanclub, via X
We spoke on the phone a lot – I was always curious to get to know Japan better. When the opportunity came, I discussed it with him, and with David Villa and Sergi Samper, and I saw that it was a good project in which I could also win a league title. I found it very interesting there. For example, in Kobe or Tokyo there are a lot of people but there's practically no noise – they're quiet cities. Everything is very orderly. People recognised me and asked for photos, but the pace of life was calm. Japanese footballers are technically very good and, as in England, the fans understand defeat as being part of the game. They don't stop cheering even if you lose 3-0. They have great loyalty.

You started the Common Goal charity in 2017 and a huge number of players and managers have since got involved. What has that meant to you?
Daniel Butler, Bedford
It's growing steadily and that's good news. There are more and more members, and the organisation is creating a structure that allows us to keep helping people. We have to continue to connect football with society. Common Goal is one of the things I'm most proud of in my career because it gives meaning to football and allows many of us to do our bit. After my career, I'll continue with Common Goal.

Which would you choose as the most memorable goal of your career?
Norhaslina binti Hasan, via X
The first that comes to mind is the bicycle kick for Manchester United against Liverpool at Anfield. It was a special afternoon. I also remember my first league goal with Valencia, the one I scored on my Chelsea debut, my first with Spain in Extremadura and the one in the final of the 2012 European Championship. But surely the most beautiful was the one in that match at Anfield against the eternal rivals.

UPFRONT

Playing off the last defender, it's the big-man-little-man partnership of football and funnies







THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

↑ "RAFA WHO?"

LIVERPOOL, ENGLAND
If you want to attract attention to your bar on Merseyside, it's not hard: simply slap a massive mural of Jurgen Klopp on the outside wall. That's exactly what the Spanish Caravan have done – going off brand to depict the exiting German, complete with an Erdinger beer. Rafa Benitez is probably tutting somewhere...
Photo *Christopher Furlong/Getty*

← CHAMPIONS, AT LAST

LEVERKUSEN, GERMANY
How strong is the Harry Kane Curse? Strong enough to beat a hex that blighted the history of Bayer Leverkusen – jeepers. Die Werkself finally won their first Bundesliga title in April, ahead of Bayern Munich, and fans raided the field. Why not?
Photo *DPA/Alamy*







↑
HALF CENTURY UP

DORTMUND, GERMANY
The Westfalenstadion will stage six games at Euro 2024, having first opened its doors in time for the 1974 World Cup and *that* Cruyff turn. Borussia Dortmund fans unveiled a 50th anniversary tifo recently – no sign of Johan, but Jurgen Klopp was inevitably there again. Rafa's still tutting...
Photo *Christof Koepsel/Getty*

↑
PAYING THE PENALTY

CHICAGO, USA
Soldier Field hosted World Cup games in 1994, but only 14,874 people saw Chicago Fire defeat Montreal – just as well for Chris Brady, irked after failing to save a penalty. Xherdan Shaqiri also played, presumably doing not a lot ahead of hammering in his traditional worldie at the Euros.
Photo *Michael Reaves/Getty*

↑
GIRLS' NIGHT OUT

AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS
All ended cheerily when Ajax faced Chelsea in the Women's Champions League, in front of 35,997 fans. Giddy youngsters got to meet their heroes and Blues boss Emma Hayes didn't have to shove anyone, like after the League Cup final. Phew...
Photo *Alexander Scheuber/ UEFA/Getty*

→
"WE'RE GONNA NEED MORE RIOT POLICE"

TUNIS, TUNISIA
Esperance de Tunis fans were bang up for their derby with Club Africain – nearly setting fire to the place with about five million flares. Good luck to the three coppers stood there, wondering how to keep them in check...
Photo *Hasan Mrad/ImagesLive/ Zuma Press Wire/Shutterstock*

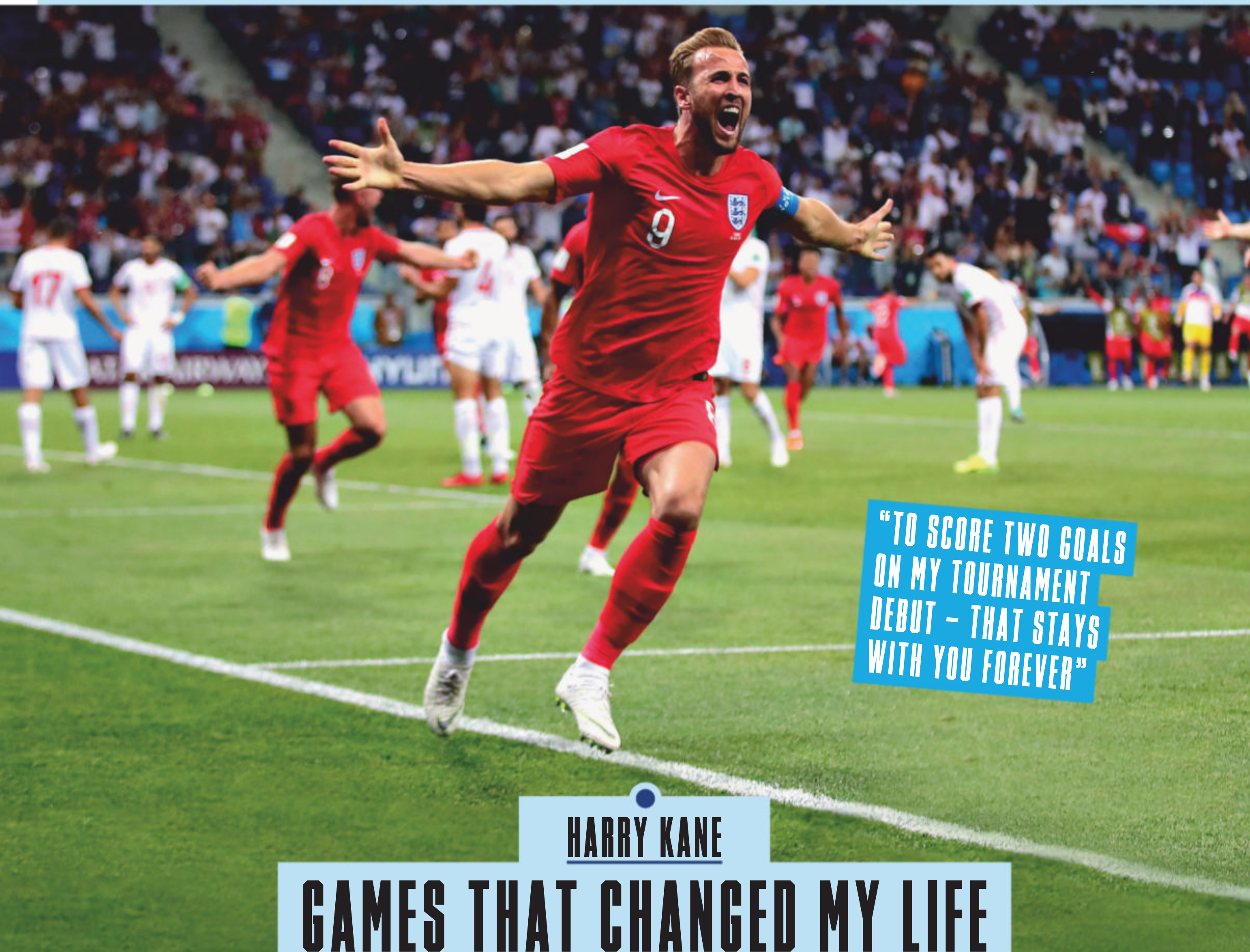






RIVER OF DREAMS

BILBAO, SPAIN
Not long ago, *FFT* brought you the story of Athletic Bilbao's 1980s side, who celebrated the La Liga title with a flotilla down the River Nervion. They were at it again in April after winning the Copa del Rey – the tour passes the Guggenheim Museum now, and its 30ft spider. Scary stuff...
***Photo** Riccardo Larreina/ AFP7/Getty*



> "TO SCORE TWO GOALS ON MY TOURNAMENT DEBUT – THAT STAYS WITH YOU FOREVER"

HARRY KANE

GAMES THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

Rochdale 1-1 L Orient

January 15, 2011
League One

"I have to kick things off here with my professional debut for Leyton Orient, in League One, away against Rochdale. I was on loan from Tottenham at the time and it was a cold, wet and windy day. As a young boy growing up, all I had ever dreamed about was playing professional football one day, so even though this wasn't the level that in time I wanted to get to, just to play a professional game for a great old club like Leyton Orient was a dream come true. I was named on the bench and I was desperate to come on and play – I kept looking at the manager [Russell Slade], hoping he'd give me the nod! Eventually that nod came and I went on for the last 20 minutes or so. That afternoon really got me up and running in my professional career."

Spurs 5-1 Sunderland

April 7, 2014
Premier League

"I need to include my first Tottenham start in the Premier League. We won 5-1 against Sunderland at White Hart Lane and I scored. My first start in the Premier League was another dream come true – I had made a few late cameos before that game, but I saw my first start as a chance to prove that I could do it at that level. To score and win the game set me off on a good run of scoring – from there, things just went up and up. I always look back at that game and wonder what might have happened if I hadn't played so well and if I hadn't scored. I wonder if things may not have worked out the way they have, so being able to take my chance that day was important. I really might not be where I am today without that performance."

England 4-0 Lithuania

March 27, 2015
International friendly

"Playing for England means the world to me, so I have to choose my debut. It was a magical moment to do it at Wembley – to score in that stadium, in front of my friends and family, was just everything I had dreamed of as a boy growing up. I remember being told by the manager Roy Hodgson that I was going to come on for the last 20 minutes and feeling like everything that had happened to me in my whole life had led up to that moment. I was a ball of nerves and energy, but also felt ready to take my chance. To mark my debut on the international stage with a goal inside two minutes of coming on was very special. Playing for England still always gives me that buzz, no matter how many times I get picked. You never lose that pride."

Tunisia 1-2 England

June 18, 2018
World Cup

"Lastly, I'll choose the game against Tunisia at the World Cup in 2018. That was my first World Cup, the biggest competition in the world and the highest pressure you can feel in football. To go out there in my first game on that stage and score two goals, including the winning goal in the last minute, put me on a bigger platform and made people around the world take notice. We went on to have a decent tournament, reaching the semi-finals, and that moment of scoring a last-minute goal in a World Cup – a tournament that I have been watching my whole life – was just incredible. Scoring goals for England is something that will stay with you forever, especially the ones in the big tournaments and the big matches."

Kane was speaking at the launch of his partnership with sustainable apparel brand Reflo

JULES BREACH

OPINION

The Channel 4 presenter is hopeful of glory for England this summer



There's nothing better than a tournament summer for football fans, and with the Euros kicking off in just a matter of weeks, the countdown is now officially on.

England head to Germany with the best crop of talent we've seen since the Golden Generation – some would argue that this group of players are even better.

In Harry Kane, Jude Bellingham and Phil Foden alone, you have three of the world's best players, all who are having remarkable seasons, in different leagues. That's before mentioning the outstanding year that the Arsenal pair of Declan Rice and Bukayo Saka have had as the Gunners have once again pushed for a Premier League title.

Gareth Southgate will know the key men who are guaranteed places in his squad if they stay fit, but you wouldn't envy the other decisions he has to make in the next few weeks about who he has to leave at home.

The England boss jokingly told Channel 4 during the March international break that he had no clue who would be in his final squad, but after an eye-catching full England debut, Kobbie Mainoo may have played himself into Southgate's plans.

Mainoo wasn't even in the original squad for those two matches, but ended up being promoted from the under-21s and then was remarkably awarded the man of the match on his first senior start – it surely points to a busy summer for the youngster.

It would be well deserved too after his breakthrough season for Manchester United – the 19-year-old has brought a calmness to the midfield for both club and now country.

Southgate talked about his ability to receive under pressure and to manipulate the ball in tight areas – his inclusion in the squad could be vital if England are to get the best out of their attacking players, such as Bellingham and Foden.

That attack will be led by Kane, but one of the tougher choices Southgate will have to make is whether he takes two other strikers, both Ollie Watkins and Ivan Toney, or if he favours one over the other and uses the space in the squad for a different position.

Perhaps Toney is a better fit in terms of like-for-like cover for Kane, and his recent performances have given Southgate food for thought, particularly after he scored his first international goal against Belgium in March, deputising well in Kane's absence.

It would seem crazy to ignore Watkins' form for Aston Villa, however: a contender for the Premier League player of the season award, he has the best goals and assists tally for a Villa player in more than 40 years, all without taking a penalty.

That can't be overlooked, and neither can the form of Cole Palmer. What a first season he's had at Chelsea – no one imagined the influence he would have had since his move from Manchester City. Not only does he have the quality, skill and numbers to back it up – scoring his 20th league goal of the season against Everton – but he also has the sort of nonchalant personality that could be exactly what England need in pressure moments at a tournament. He has to be in the squad.



There are also players like Anthony Gordon and Jarrod Bowen, who have shone for their clubs this season and will equally feel they're deserving of a spot. They could potentially make a difference in giving Southgate effective options from out wide.

It will be interesting to see whether decisions are made based on form or experience, and whether that differs for varying positions in the squad.

Southgate has continued to experiment and try out new players in the backline too, which looks to be a bit of a problem area for England, mainly due to the amount of injuries picked up this season. Depending on the recovery of key defenders, it could make a big difference to England's chances of success in Germany this summer.

There will be two Euro 2024 warm-up games against Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iceland in early June, before the team head to the tournament itself.

The process that Southgate has been working on with this young squad feels like it could reach a glorious crescendo on July 14 in Berlin – if that does happen, it would be nothing less than what they all deserve.

IT FEELS LIKE IT COULD REACH A CRESCENDO IN BERLIN IN JULY



[A O F]

364 SPINE LINE **"'Thierry Henry, Kevin De Bruyne, Jodi Jones'** is the list of the players with the most assists in a season in the top four divisions in England," says Will Green, entering via email. That's spot on, Will! Cracked the Spine Line? To win an Art Of Football A4 print or T-shirt, email us at fourfourtwo@futurenet.com or enter on X including the hashtag #FFTSpineLine

THE ULTIMATE QUIZ

Test yourself with our European Championship-themed teasers, on subjects ranging from Roteiro to Ronaldo

01 Which two nations share the record for most Euros trophies, with three each?

02 How many games did Portugal win in regular time when they triumphed at Euro 2016: one, two or three?

03 Which nation did Germany beat in the Euro 96 final at Wembley?

04 At Euro 2004, what was 'Roteiro': the matchball, the mascot or the stadium that held the final?

05 In which year did Scotland make their first ever appearance at the European Championship finals?

06 With 10 appearances at the Euros, who are the most successful team in the competition's history to have never won it?

07 Who scored the only goal in the Euro 2008 Final, as Spain beat Germany 1-0?

08 Which nation famously failed to qualify for a Euros that they later won, following the expulsion of another team?

09 Who celebrated a Euros goal with his iconic dentist's chair celebration?





11 During the 1968 tournament, how was a semi-final between Italy and the Soviet Union decided, after a 0-0 draw: by coin toss, by a replay or by drawing straws?

12 Cristiano Ronaldo (left) shared the Golden Boot at Euro 2020 with which other player?

13 How many European Championship goals has Thomas Muller scored?

14 Who did Marco van Basten score his iconic looping volley for the Netherlands against, to win the trophy in 1988?

15 Who are the only two players to have won the Euros for their country after scoring a Golden Goal in the final?

16 Jude Bellingham (left) made his England tournament debut when he appeared at Euro 2020. Who were the opposition?

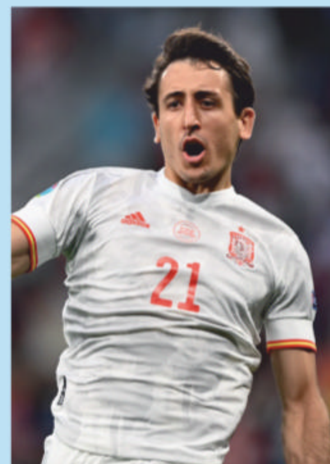
17 At which tournament would you have found a stadium nicknamed 'the Quarry', since it only had two sides and was built next to a cliff-face?

18 Who did Gareth Bale score his first tournament goal against at Euro 2016?









10 These four players all scored winning penalties in a Euros shootout – can you name them?

1. Germany, Spain **2.** One **3.** Czech Republic **4.** Matchball **5.** 1992 **6.** England **7.** Fernando Torres **8.** Denmark **9.** Paul Gascoigne **10.** Antonin Panenka, Andreas Moller, Ricardo, Mikel Oyarzabal **11.** A coin toss **12.** Patrik Schick **13.** None **14.** Soviet Union **15.** Oliver Bierhoff for Germany at Euro 96, David Trezeguet for France at Euro 2000 **16.** Croatia **17.** Euro 2004 (Estadio Municipal de Braga in Portugal) **18.** Slovakia

MY FOOTBALL

The former Joy Division and New Order bassist on living next door to Ronaldo and recording World in Motion with Gazza

When did your support of Manchester United begin?
When I was born in Ordsall, near the ground. Where I lived, you could see Old Trafford. My best mate was a City fan, so we'd go to one ground one week and the other the next. I used to park the coaches for the away fans, which was really interesting, especially when Leeds came.

What was the first game that you ever attended?
I was 10, so this would be 1966. It was the scariest thing in the world! We used to sneak in and, bloody hell, it was f**king mental with the fights and hooliganism – you were in fear of your life! I saw some terrible things with crowds and crushing; how more people weren't killed, I'll never know. But you couldn't not go, because it was f**king amazing! I was doing that from about 10 to 18.



Who was your childhood hero and did you ever meet them?
My mum worked at the Manchester Ship Canal Company and got me a job there when I was 18. On the first day, the guy said, "The last person that sat at your desk was George Best". In those days, players who had an apprenticeship at United had to have a proper job. We used to see him all the time at nightclubs and in clothes shops. I was in Magaluf with my ex-wife, Mrs Merton [Caroline Aherne, the late actress, comedian and writer], and we were in a bar when George Best was there with Rodney Marsh. We had done the soundtrack to [TV show] *Best & Marsh*. Caroline said, "Go over and say hello". I don't do things like that, but I went over and said, "Hiya George, I'm Peter Hook from New Order – I did the soundtrack for *Best & Marsh*". He just said, "I know" and turned around. He f**king blanked me! I knew it was a bad idea.

What teams did other members of Joy Division and New Order support, and those around the band such as Factory boss Tony Wilson and Joy Division/New Order manager Rob Gretton?
There was this interplay between Tony Wilson, who was a huge United fan, and Rob Gretton who was a Man City fan. They would fight like cat and dog all the time about football – it was interesting to watch. Bernard [Sumner] was a United fan. Steve Morris said he was Macclesfield, although I never heard of him going to a match, so I don't know if he said it to be churlish or whatever. Someone wrote that Ian [Curtis] was a City fan – that is the sort of thing I would remember. He wasn't built like a football fan. But we can't rely on memory.

Did you ever go to Old Trafford with Bernard?
The only time I ever went with Barney was to see England play Greece at Old Trafford when David Beckham scored that mad goal.

As co-owner of The Haçienda nightclub, did it bring you close to a number of the Manchester United players in the '80s and '90s?
They used to let on to me to curry favour so they could get in! I went there one night and parked my car – it was a Mitsubishi Shogun – and I came down and Ryan Giggs was sat on my bonnet! I got the bouncer to throw him out. Ryan went out with one of my ex-girlfriends. I was asked to do his DVD, and also to interview Paul Scholes for his DVD.

What was it like having Cristiano Ronaldo as a neighbour in Alderley Edge?
It's quite nice – you see the players differently. When Ronaldo moved in, his partner began training with my trainer. He said Ronaldo was lovely. You'd see him at the Post Office, stopping traffic. We've not had excitement like that since Beckham. He was my neighbour; so was Carlos Tevez, and Edwin van der Sar. He was wandering around my house once, checking it was OK. He said, "It's fine, Hooky, no problem here!"



How have you found recent years at Manchester United?
The form is so up and down, it drives me mad! I did an anti-Glazer record [*We'll Never Die*, with Hanky Park in 2005] and I have a mate who takes me to the directors' box, where I get to sit with the Glazers. I sit there thinking, 'I hope they don't hear that f**king record'. The problem with it is that when you've



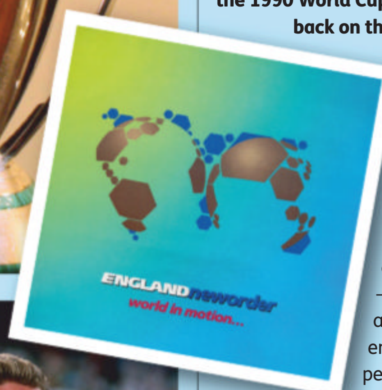


"I WAS TOLD THAT SIR ALEX IS A BIG NEW ORDER FAN. THEN HE SAID, 'WHO THE F**K ARE YOU?'"

had someone like Sir Alex, that's like the equivalent of Rob Gretton with New Order: whoever comes in after him is on a hiding to nothing. And that's been what's happened. As much as I hate to say it, I think the Glazers built them up to be a financial institution but there has been neglect at the heart of it, and that's what's gone. What I love about the United fans – me included – is that they never give up, even when it looks like they are onto a hiding. United fans are very, very loyal. I'm not worldly or wise enough to say what the problem is or how to solve it.

Did you get a chance to meet Ferguson?
A photographer at the *Manchester Evening News* said, "Come and sit with Sir Alex. He's a massive New Order fan – come and have a picture with him." Well, you can't turn that down – it's Sir Alex. After the picture was taken, he turned round and said, "Who the f**k are you?" There was a bit of overlap, because when Tony Wilson became ill, Sir Alex took over his speaking engagements and I worked with him on that."

New Order recorded *World In Motion* for the 1990 World Cup – how do you look back on the song now?



It started as *Love's Got The World In Motion*. It was two different songs: we never recorded the proper version, which was without the rap. It would have been a great New Order song – that's why it sounds like a great football song. I enjoy playing it and people love it. We played it in America and they loved it. The good thing about being out of New Order, now that we've split up, is that you get to do the things you weren't allowed to do.

Did you enjoy the overall experience?
The FA treated us like s**t. The other three [in New Order] weren't bothered – they were a bit busy – but I thought it was wonderful to be involved. To me, that was what being in a group was all about: getting chances to indulge yourself like that. It was the wackiest thing we could do; the only thing wackier would have been to do the Eurovision Song Contest. I remember Paul Gascoigne running off the pitch and getting into a Mercedes with two girls standing up through the sunroof, holding a bottle of champagne each. I thought, 'He's going to do well, that boy'.
Richard Purden







WEIRD WORLD OF FOOTBALL

MEANWHILE IN...

...Romania, boss Nicolo Napoli has been replaced at FC U Craiova – for the 10th time

It's not uncommon for clubs to have a go-to boss in times of woe – Chelsea called on Guus Hiddink, Crystal Palace phoned up Roy Hodgson, every club in the country has sent for Neil Warnock at some point.

Romanian side FC U Craiova have taken things to extremes – Italian boss Nicolo Napoli could be forgiven for never knowing whether he's coming or going.

In March, he was coming, hired by the top-flight side for the 10th time, having first taken charge in 2003. That didn't last long, but he was back in 2007, then in 2011, when he was soon sacked, hired as their sporting director, then replaced again.

That would be enough, you'd think, but no, in 2013 Napoli was rehired as boss... and soon fired again. After that: hired in 2018, fired in 2019, hired in 2020, fired in 2020, hired two times in 2022, swiftly fired on both occasions, in what's seemed the world's stormiest marriage – can't live with 'em, can't live without 'em.

Recently, he was rehired with the club in relegation trouble, only to plunge the club deeper into relegation trouble – three consecutive defeats, an exit from the Romanian Cup, and he was removed as boss after a month. His successor? Eugen Trica, himself in his fifth stint.

FC U Craiova used to think they were indecisive, but now they're not so sure...



HIPPO FC: NOT TO BE MESSED WITH

If you're looking for weird team names, head to the Liberian Lower Women's League.

There, World Girls have been leading the table recently ahead of Kneeling and Cocky FC – you have to question whether the latter have approached things with a bit of overconfidence.

In fifth place have been the fearsome Hippo FC, ahead of the more tentative Taptap and eighth-placed Small Town FC.

If their fans aren't singing "You're just a small town in Small Town" at the supporters of their nearest neighbours, we demand to know why not.

- Estonia's under-21s played a friendly with the wrong team by accident – intending to play AC Horsens from the Danish second tier, they inadvertently invited seventh-tier FC Horsens instead. Not quite the challenge they'd hoped for, they won 6-1.

- Fleetwood Town haven't had a good season in League One, but sister club Fleetwood United – nicknamed the Dubai Cods – have won the UAE's third tier.

- CSKA Sofia have sacked boss Nestor El Maestro – a Brit who was born in Serbia, grew up in Sussex and changed his name to El Maestro at 18. Modest...

JUST A MAN, DRESSED AS A BRICK

There's been sad news at West Bromwich Albion recently, with the retirement of the man who played weird mascot Boiler Man (yes, even mascots do retirement announcements these days). Fear not, though: Hull City have stepped in to fill the void... thanks to Bricky.

A bloke dressed as a brick, with a jaunty yellow hard hat to boot (Bricky isn't the official club mascot, but that of stadium sponsors MKM), the 6ft 5in mascot was on show for a recent match, while Tigers mascot Amber looking on glumly, knowing she'd been upstaged. It's all fun and games for now, but if results go badly for Hull, expect an angry fan to lob Bricky through the nearest window.



THE DEBATE

Who will win the Euros?



ENGLAND

JAMES ANDREW
EDITOR

@JamesAndrew_

PORTUGAL

ED McCAMBRIDGE
STAFF WRITER

@edmccambridge



Am I really going to do this? After everything history has taught us, have I not learned anything? No, I'm going to do it, England will win Euro 2024. There, I said it.

This is the best squad of players that the Three Lions have had for some time – such is the strength of the players in contention, there will be some very good players who would have walked into squads in the past who will be left at home this summer.

England did very well to reach the final of Euro 2020 (in 2021) and looked very good at the World Cup – there wasn't much in the game they lost to France.

Gareth Southgate then navigated the team through a tricky qualifying group unbeaten, securing wins home and away against the defending champions, Italy, to finish comfortably in top spot.

More than the results, the games have allowed the likes of Jude Bellingham, Declan Rice, Bukayo Saka and Phil Foden to grow into their England shirts and get used to playing together.

Add the more experienced players like Harry Kane, John Stones and Jordan Pickford into the fold and you have a squad with a good blend, who have all been at the top of their game domestically this season.

The so-called Golden Generation made a habit of getting knocked out in quarter-finals in the noughties, and those players talk now about how they didn't really enjoy playing for England, how it was seen as a chore rather than a privilege. There were cliques in the squad – Manchester United players would stick together and not mix too much with the rest of the squad.

Not so any more. Whether it's down to the management of Southgate or the personality of the players in the squad (most likely both), players appear to be happy when playing for England.

Domestically there are rivalries at the top of the Premier League between Arsenal, Manchester City and Liverpool, but those are put to one side when the likes of Rice, Foden and Trent Alexander-Arnold meet up with the Three Lions.

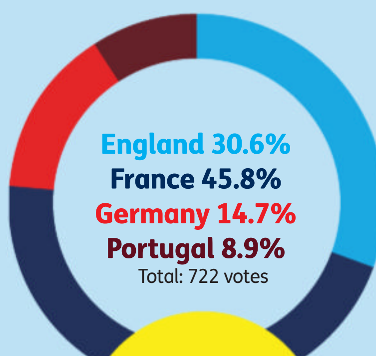
More importantly, England have been playing well and getting good results for a few years now.

July 14 in Berlin will surely be Southgate's crowning moment.



THE RESULTS ARE IN

Social view via @FourFourTwo followers on X



Tell us what you think via **#FFTDebate** on X, or email us at **fourfourtwo@futurenet.com**

I'll be honest: I drew Portugal in a family sweepstake, so here's me convincing myself (and you!) that I've absolutely nailed it.

Before anyone accuses me of not taking this debate seriously, there are several reasons to believe I really have, so hear me out. The main one is form – Portugal were the only nation to win every single one of their qualifying games for Euro 2024.

Victories against the likes of Bosnia-Herzegovina (3-0 at home, 5-0 away) and Luxembourg (9-0 at home, 6-0 away) are hardly a good yardstick by which to appraise a side's major tournament hopes but, as the old cliche goes, you can only smush Madeira cake into the faces of whoever's in front of you.

A shock 2-0 defeat against Slovenia in March ended a run of 11 consecutive wins under Roberto Martinez but, in Portugal's defence, they were staying in a hotel that subsequently auctioned off Cristiano Ronaldo's slept-in bed. Creepy, to say the least.

Speaking of Ronaldo, Portugal's geriatric talisman struck 10 times during qualifying, proving he's still very much got it. In case you'd forgotten, Lionel Messi won the last World Cup, meaning Portugal's skipper, fuelled by ego alone, is absolutely guaranteed to take his A-game to Germany in a bid to remind everyone once and for all of his GOAT credentials.

The Euro 2016 winners have an enviable roster of attacking diamonds beyond CR7, including Rafael Leao, Joao Felix, Diogo Jota, Bernardo Silva, Goncalo Ramos and Bruno Fernandes. They also have a superb defence, with 41-year-old Pepe as imperious as ever alongside the likes of Ruben Dias, Diogo Dalot and Joao Cancelo. It seems like a balanced squad – they scored the most goals and conceded the fewest of any team in Europe during qualifying.

They should top their group, before facing a third-placed team in the last 16 – the quarter-finals almost a certainty. Then it would be anybody's game – with both Ronaldo and Fernandes in their side, I'd back them to hold their nerve in any penalty shootouts.

Mark my words, I'll be prising that fiver out of my grandma's arthritic hands before the summer is out...







THIS TIME,

A trophy has agonisingly eluded England in recent years, but they go into Euro 2024 this summer among the favourites again. Can Gareth Southgate lead the Three Lions to glory, and what will this tournament mean for his future as manager?

Words Chris Flanagan
Additional reporting Matthew Ketchell, Ed McCambridge, Ryan Dabbs, Ian Murtagh, Matt Nash
Portraits The FA / Unmarked Photography

FINALLY?











Sir Alf Ramsey never forgot the moment when his dream job came to an end. Deep inside what was the FA's Lancaster Gate headquarters, the England manager was summoned from his office to the plush council chamber to learn his fate.

"It was the most devastating half hour of my life," the World Cup winner later said. "I stood in a room almost full of staring committee men. It was like I was on trial. I thought I was going to be hanged."

The 54-year-old's executioners advised him to go on holiday, to avoid 'ordeals with the press'. The FA kept the decision secret for 10 days, until Joe Mercer's appointment as caretaker manager. Then, on May 1, 1974, fully 50 years ago this month, the FA announced that Ramsey's tenure was over.

The knives had been out for some time, both inside and outside the FA, but the fatal incision was a drab 0-0 draw in Portugal the previous month. He'd made England world champions in 1966, setting expectations sky-high, before guiding them to third place at Euro 68, then the quarter-finals of the 1970 World Cup. Illness to goalkeeper Gordon Banks didn't help, but Ramsey's decision to substitute Martin Peters and Bobby Charlton when 2-1 up against West Germany in the fierce Mexico heat – supposedly to save them for the semi-final – backfired spectacularly.

Things unravelled. Six years after Geoff Hurst's Wembley hat-trick against West Germany, just when you thought it was all over, Ramsey's England lost convincingly to the same opponents at the same stadium, and failed to qualify for the finals of Euro 72.

His team were derided as 'Ramsey's Robots', because of the coach's tendency to prioritise functionality over flair. "Cautious, joyless football was scarcely bearable even while it was bringing victories – when it brings defeat, there can be only one reaction," wrote the esteemed Hugh McIlvanney in *The Observer*. "His method was justifiable in 1966, but since then it has become an embarrassment."

Ramsey would be given one last chance to reach a fourth major tournament, but an infamous Wembley draw against Poland and an inspired Jan Tomaszewski – a "circus clown in gloves" according to Derby County manager Brian Clough, on punditry duty that night – prevented them from making it to West Germany for the 1974 World Cup.

England's most celebrated manager led his country at three major tournament finals and it's taken half a century for another man to surpass that tally. Sir Bobby Robson, Sven-Goran Eriksson, Roy Hodgson, all departed after three – one short of Sir Walter Winterbottom's four between 1950 and 1962.

This summer, Gareth Southgate will equal Winterbottom's record. The ex-Middlesbrough defender has succeeded where Ramsey failed, breezing to qualification for his fourth straight tournament by beating Italy – their vanquishers in the Euro 2020 Final – home and away. With the 53-year-old's contract due to expire this December, this could still be Southgate's last tournament as England manager. For almost two years, he's openly contemplated his future – wary that criticism only ever seems to be one bad result away.

Unlike Ramsey 50 years ago, though, the FA are reportedly keen for Southgate to extend his stay as England boss, with his side fourth in the FIFA rankings, and Euro 2024 favourites alongside France.

End the summer with a trophy, and he'll have forever banished jibes that he and his







players are nearly men. Will this finally be the year when the Three Lions deliver glory?

BLANKENHAIN 1-0 BADEN-BADEN

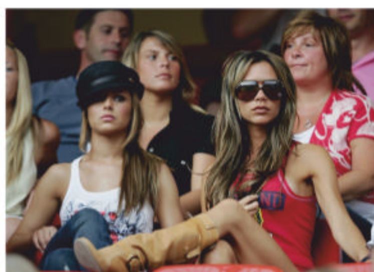
Those in Southgate's squad insist they truly believe: yes, England can win Euro 2024. They've already reached a World Cup semi-final and a European Championship final in recent years – only victory provides the unequivocal marker of success.

"Our chances are as good as any other nation's," Liverpool's Trent Alexander-Arnold tells *FourFourTwo*. "We're a team that can go and win the tournament. If we play the way we know we can, we can beat any nation we come up against on our day."

Just a cursory glance at England's squad explains the full-back's optimism – even if no-one is under any illusions about how difficult success will be to achieve.

"We're confident, and I'd say humble as well," Alexander-Arnold says. "It's not an arrogance. It's not a cockiness. It's a self-confidence and a self-awareness of how good we are and how good we can be. With the right team, the right tactics, the right setup, the right performances and the right gameplans, there's no reason why we can't come home with the trophy."

Clockwise from above England are more united than ever; Posh & Co lit up 2006; Sir Bobby got to three finals; Sir Alf also reached three; including *that* one in '66



"WE BECAME A CIRCUS. FOOTBALL WAS ALMOST SECONDARY TO THE MAIN EVENT IN 2006"

Such belief was absent when Southgate first took charge – England went into the 2018 World Cup with low expectations. Disaster against Iceland at Euro 2016, the last time a Three Lions boss went into a tournament with an expiring contract, was a nadir. Minutes after defeat, Hodgson confirmed his exit – back then, he was the only man to have managed England at two different European Championships finals.

After Sam Allardyce's 67-day, pint-of-wine reign, Southgate quickly formed four-fifths of a rearguard that remains first-choice. Jordan Pickford, Kyle Walker, John Stones and Harry Maguire are regulars and, once the latter recovered from injury, combined to concede just twice during the entirety of Euro 2020. The manager also created a more relaxed atmosphere – at the World Cup in Russia, families were allowed to visit the team hotel after matches, while not being so omnipresent that they became a distraction.

Last time England headed to a tournament in Germany, the situation couldn't have been more different. In 2006, the FA thought they had chosen the perfect base – the Schloss Buhlerhohe Hotel on the outskirts of Baden-Baden, an upmarket spa town in the Black Forest near the French border. "It was as secluded as it could be," FA chief executive Brian Barwick said. "The hotel and training base were miles out of town, up a hill, and the players' wives could stay in the town."

That was at the behest of skipper David Beckham, who advised Sven-Goran Eriksson the WAGs should be nearby. Perennially keen to keep his players happy, Eriksson agreed.

"We could not go against the captain's wishes, and you have to give the coach what the coach wants," high-ranking FA staffer David Davies later told *FFT*.

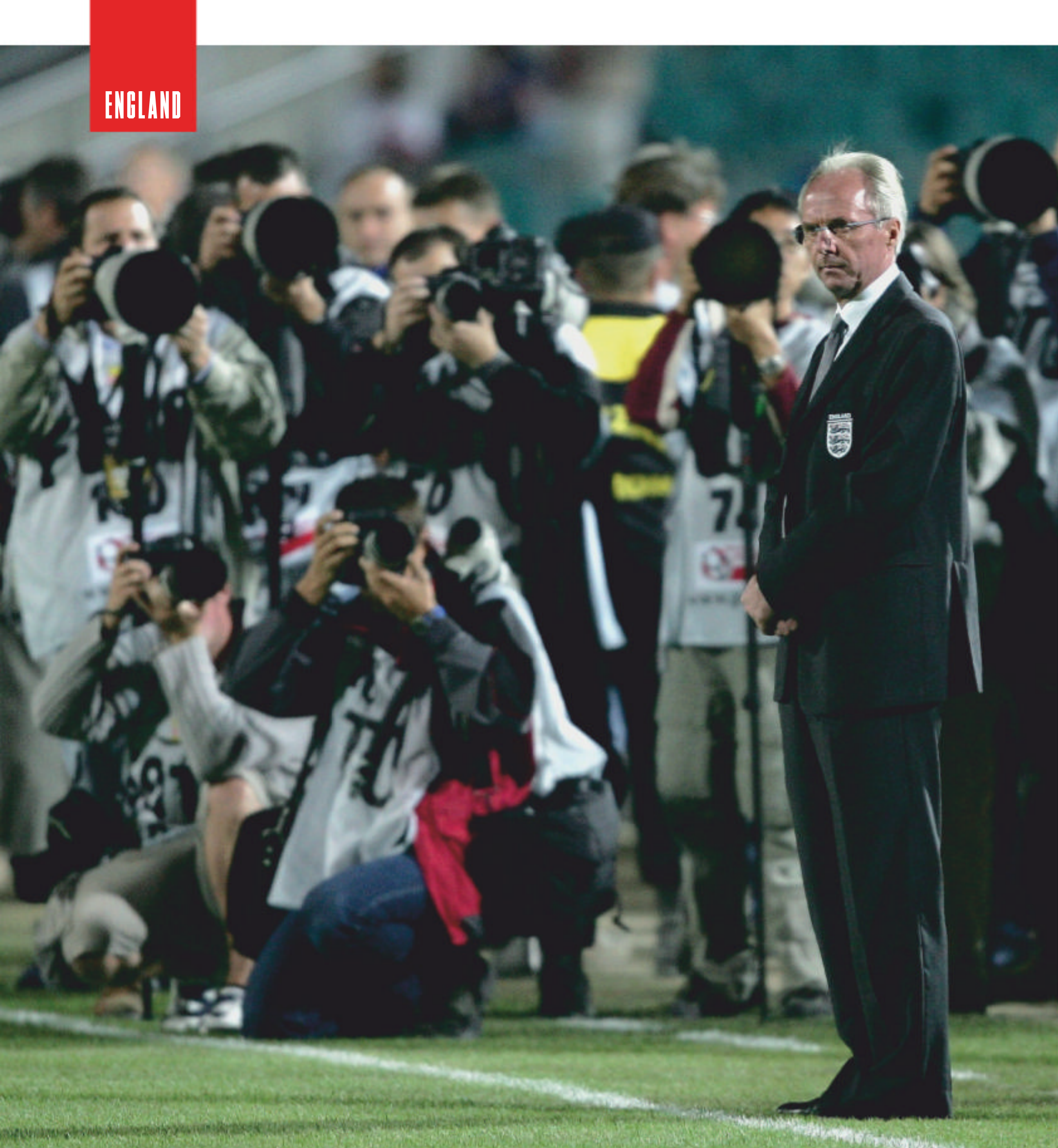
The plan didn't age well. The WAGs included Spice Girl Victoria Beckham, Ashley Cole's fiancee Cheryl from Girls Aloud, plus the future Coleen Rooney and other well-known tabloid fodder. They attracted 24/7 attention from paparazzi, creating a sea of headlines the team could have done without.

"We became a circus," Rio Ferdinand said. "Football almost became secondary to the main event." Highlights of that particular circus included the WAGs going on a £57,000 shopping spree in just one hour, and regular raucous nights out, featuring Frank Lampard's then-partner Elen Rivas dancing on a table singing Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*. The squad were afraid, they were petrified.

This summer, England will stay at the Weimarer Land Spa & Golf Resort in the tiny town of Blankenhain, 55 miles south-west of Leipzig. With Southgate and the FA keen to avoid another Baden-Baden, reports have suggested the WAGs could be based at a five-star hotel fully 40 minutes away.

England arrive at this tournament in not dissimilar shape to 2006. A generation of players that seem very capable of glory, albeit so far into the manager's tenure that goodwill from fans and certain sections of the media is in increasingly short supply.

Eighteen years ago, Eriksson announced as early as January he'd be stepping down after the World Cup. The genial Swede's patience was shot following persistent criticism and press intrusion, not long after an undercover ▸



Above Eriksson was constant fodder for the tabloid press

News of the World reporter – dubbed the 'Fake Sheikh' – tricked him into saying he could be open to joining Aston Villa. Mazher Mahmood was later imprisoned for perverting the course of justice in another sting.

The Swede was aware of a growing feeling in England that he wasn't maximising the team's potential, despite runs to the quarter-finals of the 2002 World Cup and Euro 2004. A 5-1 win in Germany at the start of his reign remained the highlight. "That was almost too much," Eriksson admitted recently. "It put expectations even higher."

They were expectations he couldn't match, even if in isolation, a third quarter-final in a row in 2006 was respectable. Players spoke of disappointment not to clinch the trophy, but not disillusionment in the squad.

"Playing at that World Cup was great," Joe Cole tells *FFT* now. The midfielder notably scored a wonder goal against Sweden. "We didn't manage to get over the line, the stars weren't aligned and it wasn't our time. But if you can't enjoy playing for England, you're in the wrong game. It was a fantastically organised tournament. I loved it."

With the Golden Generation still seemingly going strong, Eriksson's detractors believed a replacement boss could do better. Under Steve McClaren, stability disintegrated and England didn't even qualify for Euro 2008, the Manchester United assistant's tenure defined by an umbrella. The grass isn't always greener – in five tournaments between Eriksson's departure and Southgate's arrival, the Three Lions reached one quarter-final.

"I KNEW THE RUBBISH WE WOULD'VE GOT IF WE'D LOST BOTH THE MARCH FRIENDLIES"

"A TRAIN DRIVER?!"

Glory looked like it had finally arrived for England when Luke Shaw fired Southgate's side ahead against Italy at Euro 2020, less than two minutes after kick-off in their first final for 55 years, back at Wembley.

What happened next will haunt Southgate and his players forever. Italy's scrambled equaliser from Leonardo Bonucci. Penalty misses from Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho and Bukayo Saka. Suddenly, the dream was gone. Football was coming to Rome.

When England lost 4-0 at home to Hungary in the Nations League 11 months later, amid sustained booing, anti-Southgate feeling soared, despite his team having already qualified for the 2022 World Cup. Hurt by events at Molineux, the manager began to doubt how long he wanted to remain at the helm for the first time. Was it time to go?

ENGLAND MANAGERS BY WIN PERCENTAGE

Manager	Win %
Sam Allardyce	100.0
Fabio Capello	66.7
GARETH SOUTHGATE	**61.3**
Sir Alf Ramsey	61.1
Glenn Hoddle	60.7
Ron Greenwood	60.0
Sven-Goran Eriksson	59.7
Roy Hodgson	58.9
Sir Walter Winterbottom	56.1
Steve McClaren	50.0
Sir Bobby Robson	49.5
Don Revie	48.3
Terry Venables	47.8
Graham Taylor	47.4
Kevin Keegan	38.9

(Excluding caretakers)

"There was negativity about me being in charge," he later said. "The last thing I wanted was for that to be the overarching feeling going into a World Cup, when you need the fans and everybody behind the team. If the debate was only going to be about finding flaws in what we were doing, in order that I go at the end at the World Cup, then that would have been very difficult for the team to perform at their best."

England were relegated at the end of the Nations League, going to Qatar on the back of a six-match winless run. Sir Bobby Robson had gone into his third tournament as Three Lions boss in similarly difficult fashion, winning only 12 of 28 games, losing every match at Euro 88, then drawing a friendly with Saudi Arabia. "In the name of Allah, go," one newspaper headline screamed. "Robbo should be a train driver," was the slightly puzzling sub-header. Thankfully he stayed – in that third tournament, he led England to the semi-finals of Italia 90.

When England beat Iran 6-2 in their 2022 World Cup opener, Southgate's side similarly changed the nation's mood. By the time they reached the quarter-finals, they were the tournament's top scorers and riding the crest of a wave. Crucially, the manager had got the best out of 19-year-old Jude Bellingham, one of the tournament's stars.

The midfielder goes into Euro 2024 having moved to Real Madrid and shone for los Blancos: still only 20, he's become a hugely influential presence in the England midfield.

"He's a special player, and he's doing it at one of the biggest clubs in the world," David Seaman, England's Euro 96 penalty-saving hero, tells *FFT*. "He's one of those players you could build a team around. He's that good."

Bellingham's England team-mates fully expected their new talisman's continued post-Qatar ascent. "For the people closest to him who saw him play at the World Cup, and have been with him at England camps, it's no surprise he's performed how he has this season, with the mentality and ability he's got," Trent Alexander-Arnold confirms.

"He's going to be very important to England, now and in the future."

Not that Bellingham's compatriots are just going to sit back and leave him to it.

"If you take away the other 10 players and put Jude against 11, he's going to get beat," Alexander-Arnold adds. "He needs the team, we need him – he knows that and we know that. It's a team game. It doesn't matter how good one individual is, you need the team to pull through. You need the full squad, especially in tournament football.

"We're all aware of how good Jude is and how good many individuals there are in this England team – the talent we've got is outrageous. But I'm a firm believer that the best team wins tournaments, not the best group of individuals. We're going to need individuals to perform. But you need 20 individuals to perform."

SMELLING THE COFFEE

For the most part, England did perform in their quarter-final against France in Qatar, only for it all to come crashing down. Les Bleus' two goals came largely against the run of play, then another spot-kick disaster, this time from Harry Kane during the game itself, sealed a crushing 2-1 defeat.

FourFourTwo was in the post-match press conference at the Al Bayt Stadium that mid-December night – an ashen-faced Southgate was clearly devastated. "Fine margins," was his assessment of a game that got away from his side, without playing badly against the reigning world champions.



Above "Don't worry, H, you're still on penalties" **Below** Jude is England's new creative spark

So raw was the emotion, thoughts about his future swirled once more. Asked if he was staying as boss, his answer was non-committal – despite his contract running until December 2024. "Tonight, there's too much in my head to think logically about any of that," he said. "Emotionally you go through so many different feelings – the energy it takes through these tournaments is enormous, so I want to make the right decision, whatever that is. It's right to take a bit of time to do that."

A week later, after discussions with his family, Southgate confirmed he was staying. "They said you've got to give this one more go, and try to get this trophy," he revealed of the conversations he had with his nearest and dearest. A 10-match unbeaten run followed in 2023 – only the second time since 1994 that England had gone through an entire calendar year without losing a single game.

Back in Sir Walter Winterbottom's day, his fourth tournament hurtled towards him after an impressive run of form, too: during six successive fixtures in 1960 and 1961, England beat Northern Ireland 5-2, Luxembourg 9-0, Spain 4-2, Wales 5-1, Scotland 9-3 and Mexico 8-0. "The 1961 team was actually better than the side that won the World Cup in 1966," Jimmy Greaves later insisted.

That was until injuries hit. England lost to Scotland at Hampden Park just before the 1962 World Cup, then narrowly scraped through their group in Chile – losing to Hungary and drawing 0-0 with Bulgaria. "I had six cups of coffee during the match, but that didn't keep me awake," wrote the *Daily Mirror*'s Frank Wilson. Brazil beat them in the quarter-finals and Winterbottom quit, ending 16 years in charge.

Defeat to Brazil this March meant criticism of Southgate resurfaced, too, so Bellingham's 95th-minute leveller against Belgium three days later was handy. "I knew the rubbish we would have got if we'd lost two games on the bounce," the midfielder said post-match.

Despite those unconvincing March results, England remain heavy favourites to win Group C at Euro 2024. After warm-up games against Bosnia-Herzegovina at St James' Park on June 3, then against Iceland at Wembley four days later, they open their tournament against Serbia in Gelsenkirchen on June 16 – ▸

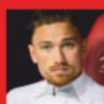
FOOTBALL HERITAGE

Thanks to family connections, several players born in England could appear for other countries at the Euros – including these four



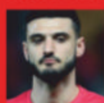
MATT O'RILEY
DENMARK

The Celtic midfielder could line up against the country of his birth in the group stage. The Hounslow-born former England Under-18 international began his senior career at Fulham and MK Dons, but switched to Denmark's U21s in 2022, courtesy of his maternal side of the family. "I do feel quite Danish," he said. "My mum is Danish and I can speak a decent amount." Won his second cap for the senior side this March.



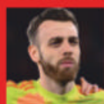
MATTY CASH
POLAND

Slough-born Matthew Stuart Cash might not sound Polish, but qualifies via his maternal grandparents, who hailed from Gdansk. The Aston Villa full-back got his first call-up in 2021 – he now has 15 caps, starting all four of their games at the 2022 World Cup, also appearing as a sub in the Euro 2024 play-off semi, before injury ruled him out against Wales.



ARMANDO BROJA
ALBANIA

Broja's name sounds unmistakably Albanian, but like Cash, he was born in Berkshire footballing hub Slough. What next, David Brent playing for Georgia? Both Broja's parents are Albanian, and he's appeared for the country from U19s upwards. On loan at Fulham from Chelsea this term, the striker now has four goals in 19 senior international appearances.



ANGUS GUNN
SCOTLAND

Famous dad Bryan hails from the far north of Scotland and won six caps after heading south to become a legend at Norwich, where Angus was born in 1996. A goalkeeper like his old man, Gunn Jnr plays for the Canaries now, too – he represented England up to U21 level, but switched to Scotland in 2023 and has since featured regularly.

their first fixture against the Serbs since their 2006 split from Montenegro.

A clash with Denmark in Frankfurt is a repeat of the Euro 2020 semi-final, before England close the group in Cologne against Slovenia – flashbacks to the 2010 World Cup, when Fabio Capello's side had to beat the same opponents in their last group game, or face early elimination. "We were feeling massive pressure going into that game," Jermain Defoe, the man who scored the only goal that day, tells *FFT*. "We needed a result no matter what, but I loved playing in those games, when the pressure was really high. That's what you become a footballer for.

"I was confident I'd score if I got my chance – the stakes were so high, I knew I had to. If I didn't score and we didn't win, we were going home. I still remember vividly the ball hitting the back of the net and my team-mates jumping on me. Big moments like that stick with you forever."

This time, England hope they'll face Slovenia in a much better position – ideally having already booked their place in the last 16. Southgate will take charge of his 100th Three Lions match in the quarter-finals if they get that far – should things go well, a potential path could pit them against Italy, Spain or Croatia in the last eight, with France possibly awaiting in the semi-finals.

"WHY CHANGE A GOOD THING?"

England have the advantage of a relatively settled and experienced side – with everyone

> **"GARETH HAS TO GET THE BACK FOUR RIGHT – KEEP CLEAN SHEETS AND THEIR FORWARDS WIN GAMES"**

fully fit, the only place in the starting XI seemingly up for debate would be who joins Bellingham and Declan Rice in midfield. Pickford, Walker, Stones, Maguire and Luke Shaw still look like Southgate's first-choice rearguard, with Bukayo Saka, Phil Foden and Harry Kane his preferred front three.

In Bellingham, Foden and Kane, there's an argument that England may boast 2023-24's best individual players in each of La Liga, the Premier League and the Bundesliga respectively. Kane has scored at a rate of a goal a game during his first season at Bayern Munich, even if Bayer Leverkusen's historic title means that, perhaps significantly, England's record goalscorer is still to get that major trophy monkey off his back.

The Three Lions skipper is now 30 – young enough to know he has at least one or two more tournaments at top form, but old enough to know that time is ticking on his long-held dream of clinching glory with England. Pickford, Walker, Stones and Maguire will be in their fourth decade by tournament kick-off, too – as is Kieran Trippier, who started games at each of Southgate's three



previous tournaments and hopes to force his way into the line-up again, either in his favoured right-back position, or at left-back, where he twice featured at Euro 2020.

"I'll play anywhere," Trippier said recently, when *FFT* caught up with him at an event. "But if I play or don't play, people know me by now – if I play, I'll give everything, and if I don't play, I'll give everything. The next tournament I'll be 35, so you've got to be realistic – it's highly unlikely I'd make that one, because of the players in my position."

Alexander-Arnold and Reece James are nearly 10 years his junior.

"There's a wealth of talent in that area," says Danny Mills, who played right-back for England at the 2002 World Cup. "The modern game has changed massively and quite substantially in the way full-backs play, but I still believe the basic principles remain the same, which means you have to be a good defender first and foremost. For that reason, Walker would be my first choice, with Trippier as back-up."

Alexander-Arnold's past four competitive starts for England have all come in central midfield, and he could be an option there at the Euros, rather than at full-back.

"He's a wonderful footballer, but I'm quite old-fashioned in my football philosophy," Mills says. "You have four defenders plus a goalkeeper responsible for keeping a clean sheet, then six other players to create and score goals. Trent may be the best attacking full-back, but he's part of a Liverpool side who dominate possession and are on top most of the time. When you're up against it, which England will be at times, especially during the latter stages of a tournament, you have to be the best at both ends of the pitch. In some big games, I've seen him caught out positionally.

"You're a defender for a reason – because you're not good enough to be a forward. That's not me being deliberately disparaging or controversial. If you're that good, your main job is to stick the ball in the back of the net. Trent is clearly a modern-day full-back who plays a very fluid role. With the talent he has, I'm not surprised many see him evolving into a midfielder."





Top to bottom "Do you think Gareth still rates us?"; Mainoo may even start; England expects

There's no less conjecture at centre-back, with Maguire struggling for game time at Manchester United. Whatever the truth of Ben White's decision to not join up with the squad in March – some putting it down to his relationship with Southgate assistant Steve Holland – England may rue not being able to call on the Arsenal man's versatility.

Mills concurs with Southgate's regular selection of Stones and Maguire. "I'd still go with that pair, but there's a real lack of strength in depth there," he says. "When I played for England, it was our strongest department. Now it's probably the weakest, along with the left-back position, with both Luke Shaw and Ben Chilwell having fitness issues. Gareth has to get that back four right – if England can keep a clean sheet, then with the attacking talent at their disposal, they should win the vast majority of games."

In midfield, 33-year-old Jordan Henderson could become the first England player to appear at seven different major tournaments – the Three Lions have qualified for the last eight World Cups or Euros, their longest streak. Whether Henderson retains his place in the starting line-up is altogether more uncertain, after a difficult season at Al Ettifaq and Ajax, plus competition from Kobbie Mainoo, Conor Gallagher, James Maddison and Alexander-Arnold. Foden can also play centrally, with Mason Mount recently returning from a long injury absence, too.

In the forward line, there's a bunfight just to make the squad between the likes of Jack Grealish, Marcus Rashford, Ollie Watkins, Ivan Toney, Jarrod Bowen, Anthony Gordon and Cole Palmer – the latter two starred in England's Under-21 Euros triumph last summer. Palmer has superb since joining Chelsea at the start of the season and by mid-April was rivalling Erling Haaland for the Premier League Golden Boot.

"There are quite a lot of players like him on the fringes, but I don't think Gareth will go too far away from the experienced players he's played up to now," Seaman says. "I don't think there will be any surprises. Why change a good thing? It's working.

"Now, you just need a bit of luck, for your key players need to stay fit and avoid injury. Yes, he may add a bit of gold dust with someone like Cole Palmer, but it's a different pressure playing for your club to playing for your country." After 75 caps and five major tournaments, Seaman would know.

When it comes to Pickford's back-ups in between the sticks, there's the opposite issue. Nick Pope and Aaron Ramsdale are both used to being around the squad, but haven't had much game time at club level in recent times – the former because of injury, the latter after falling behind David Raya in the pecking order at Seaman's old club Arsenal.

"It's tough for him not playing," Seaman says. "Gareth knows what he can do but it's ▸



BEWARE THE ITV CURSE

England's last five eliminations at major tournaments all have one thing in common – ITV were the broadcaster for every single one.

Since 1998, ITV have screened 30 England games live at tournaments – the Three Lions have a win ratio of 27 per cent, triumphing eight times, drawing 10 and losing 12. The BBC, in contrast, have shown 27 games – England have a win ratio of 70 per cent, securing victory 19 times, drawing once and losing seven.

ITV screened the group stage defeat to Uruguay that knocked England out of the 2014 World Cup, plus the Euro 2016 humiliation against Iceland, the 2018 World Cup semi-final against Croatia, and the 2022 World Cup loss to France. Both BBC and ITV showed the Euro 2020 final defeat to Italy – the ITV curse is stronger than the BBC good luck charm, it seems.

This summer, the BBC will show England's first two group games against Serbia and Denmark, so expect Gareth Southgate's side to get off to a flying start, before it all comes crashing down in the third against Slovenia on ITV.

If that doesn't fatally wound them, the Three Lions would have to run an ITV gauntlet for almost the entire knockout phase – the channel have the rights to show England in the last 16 and the semi-final, before sharing the final with the BBC again if they get that far. Good luck, lads, you'll need it...



Above Rice has been superb for club and country **Top** Will Gareth stay on to make it a full decade?

not perfect preparation, for sure. Hopefully we still pick him. In terms of goalkeepers, we've only really had Jordan Pickford playing all the time for his club."

READY TO GO?

No tournament features every player in perfect condition, but England have a squad capable of competing with the best.

"The players Gareth has to choose from are unbelievable," Defoe says. "Just going through that midfield and attack: Rice, Bellingham, Foden, Maddison, Saka, Grealish, Rashford, Kane – so many talented forwards, so many combinations.

"I said at the past few tournaments that we had a chance, and the boys have shown their class. They've been a little bit unlucky not to win one. We're very close now. This team has what it takes to finish the job."

Joe Cole agrees. "This group of players have got everything now," he says. "They've had the experience of going close in World Cups and the Euros before. They've grown as a group. We have so many top players, playing Champions League football for big clubs. We've got the best No.9 in the world, and maybe the best No.10 as well.

"Even if you took our best players out of the team, England would still be competitive. It doesn't matter if it's Foden, Bellingham, Grealish, Maddison, Mount, Saka, Raheem Sterling – there's so much quality, and the manager will put it on pitch in the right way.

"This tournament is a massive chance, and I fully expect us to go all the way. The key is mindset – are the players ready to win it? They have to ask themselves that question before they go out. Are they ready? There's no reason for them not to believe in themselves. I'd say to the players, which team is better than you in this tournament? They might say something different, but I guarantee none of them think there's a better team than them. The only thing that's going to get in their way is their belief."

Southgate sensed that, when it came to the crunch, a slight lack of belief may have got in their way against France at the World Cup, such were the reputations of the stars they faced. Their display alone showed they were more than capable of beating Les Bleus.

"The performance against France showed the players, if they didn't believe it before," he later said. "But I still wonder whether they truly believed that before the game.

"We're in a different landscape now to any previous England team, because of our past success. In our own minds, winning is probably the only thing that will fulfil us."

External expectations are similar, creating a pressure that can be difficult to deal with. David Seaman experienced that as a player himself at some tournaments, when fans and media were optimistic of glory.

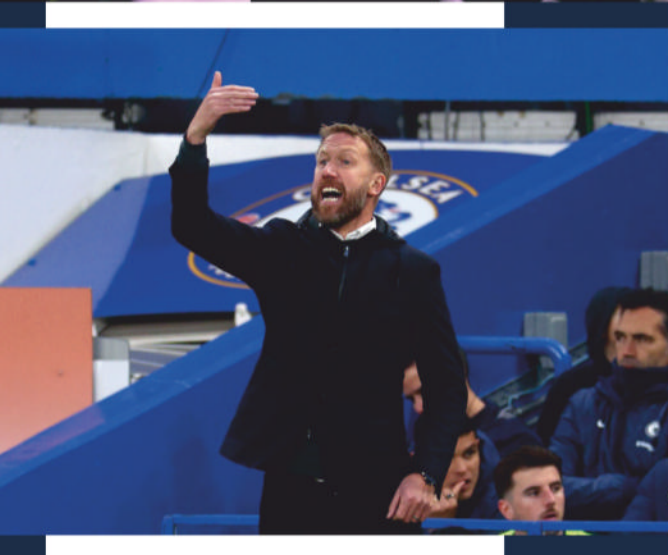
"You just think, 'I hope you're right!'," he says. "All you can be is calm and not shout it from the rooftops. But you know that if we all play to our best and bring our A-game, then we have a great chance.

"The group they've been drawn into for this tournament seems OK, but as ever with England, it won't be about qualifying from the group, but who you play from there."

PEP, JOSE OR STEVE COOPER

How the tournament goes could ultimately decide whether Southgate decides to stay as boss, or call it a day after eight years. His current contract running to the end of the year, it technically includes the next edition of the Nations League this autumn – League B fixtures against the Republic of Ireland, Finland and Greece – though it seems logical that he'd either pen a new deal before then, or depart to give a new boss time to bed in.





Below Howe and Potter are possible future England gaffers

> "THIS TOURNAMENT IS A MASSIVE CHANCE AND I EXPECT US TO GO ALL THE WAY IN GERMANY"

Ahead of the Euros, he's stayed non-committal, even if reports have suggested the FA want to extend his deal. Southgate is a good fit for the governing body, after all – a steady hand who's popular with the players and has produced consistent results, adeptly dealing with the media, and never ending up in the tabloids for the wrong reasons.

In the past, there may have been the temptation to bring in high-profile renowned trophy winners such as Jose Mourinho but the Special One is a potential hand grenade if things go wrong. Likewise, Thomas Tuchel.

Beyond the over-ambitious names of Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp, among the other recent bookmakers' favourites to be the Southgate's successor are Eddie Howe, Graham Potter, Lee Carsley and Steve Cooper. All capable, but none so wildly popular that there's a clamour. How the red tops would react to the latter, a Welshman, in charge of the Three Lions is another matter.

Southgate may yet opt to stay, despite recent links with a move to Manchester United under Sir Jim Ratcliffe, but he's not about to make that decision now. Fabio Capello got a shiny new two-year contract just nine days before the start of the 2010 World Cup, only for that to look spectacularly ill-advised post-last 16 exit. In the end, he didn't make it as far as Euro 2012.

"We've consciously shelved any discussions internally about what might be next," Southgate said in March. "If we'd sat and signed a new contract before the tournament, everybody would have said, 'Well, you did this with Capello, you should be proving yourself before you sign.'

"We'll have to sit and think about that at the end of the tournament. We could stink the place out and everybody wants me shot. I'm not expecting us to stink the place out."

Many hope he does remain, and become the first manager since Ramsey to spend a decade as England boss. "I'd like him to stay, but maybe I'm biased," Jermain Defoe says. "I like him as a person, and he put me back into the England squad at 34. I just think the job he's done deserves so much credit. We've been so unlucky not to win a tournament under Gareth. We've been so close, and you can't say that about many of his predecessors. It all depends on him though, and how he feels."

Southgate's former Middlesbrough team-mate Danny Mills agrees. "We used to share the driving from Harrogate to the training ground every day – we still live close by and see each other regularly," the former full-back says. "Gareth is a fantastic person – his manner and the way he treats people has transformed England. He buys into the ethos of individuals as a human being, not just as a footballer. Every England manager will be criticised until they win something. Perhaps even after winning something. He's done a magnificent job. Sometimes players aren't truly appreciated until they're out of the team, and it's the same with Gareth. He won't be appreciated until he's gone.

"It's up to him, though, and I'm not sure he's too bothered. Gareth is very comfortable in his own skin. He knows his own strengths and weaknesses. He doesn't let outside noise affect him. A lot of critics use his time as manager of Middlesbrough as a stick to beat him with, but that's always been totally unfair – he took over when the club were slashing the wage bill and he didn't have the resources Steve McClaren had. Even though Boro went down under him, it's wrong to say he was a failure there.

"Perhaps there's a part of Gareth that wants to have another crack at club level but he's such a well-rounded person, he knows there's a life away from football and I just wonder if he'll want to go off and do something completely different when he does eventually leave the England job."

David Seaman believes his Euro 96 team-mate's legacy is already secure – insisting Southgate doesn't need to win the tournament 28 years on to be remembered as a successful Three Lions boss.

"For me, that's only the pressure that the media put on him," Seaman says. "If he doesn't hang around, Gareth has done a fantastic job. But would I have him for the next two to four years? Yes I would.

"We're in a great place to win something now, so let's not put too much pressure on ourselves. I've been in England squads where there's so much expectation on us, and it doesn't help. We're now in the best position we've been in for a long time, with a real chance of doing something special in Germany. What Gareth has managed to do is get us to a place where we are, if not favourites, then certainly second favourites to win the trophy. Euro 2020 was special, the 2018 World Cup was great, and it would be ideal from my point of view if he won something during his time as England boss."

Joe Cole has already pictured that moment this summer – right down to the identity of the matchwinner in the final. "Harry Kane, an Englishman who plays for Bayern Munich, scoring the winning goal at a tournament in Germany," he muses. "Hopefully. Sometimes football brings these stories."

Over the next two-and-a-half months, Southgate will do everything in his power to help England to glory. "I have no idea where we'll be in the middle of July," he said. "Other than I hope it's Trafalgar Square, and let's get the party on."

Two years ago, it was the Lionesses in that square – not since 1966 have the men's team enjoyed such celebrations. Sir Alf Ramsey, the man who masterminded that triumph, never made it as far as major tournament number four. Half a century after Ramsey's exit, Gareth Southgate has made it. Now, he's hoping to make it count.

IN SEARCH

In 11 previous major tournaments, Scotland have never made it out of the group stage. But after qualifying for Euro 2024 in style, they have a real chance to reach the knockouts – and that could be just the start...

OF HISTORY

It's no longer enough for Scotland 'just' to qualify for a major international tournament. Heading into this summer's European Championship, that may be the highest compliment you can pay Steve Clarke.

When Clarke masterminded the Scots' qualification for Euro 2020, he changed the fortunes of a national team that hadn't been on any big stage since 1998. Now, after beating Spain and coming from behind to win in Norway, qualifying for Euro 2024 with two games to spare, Scotland are dreaming of reaching the knockout stage of a tournament for the first time, at the 12th attempt. In eight World Cups and three European Championships, they have always fallen at the first hurdle: the group stage.

Even a seven-game winless run to enter the tournament hasn't dented confidence levels, as Clarke opted to push his men out of any comfort zone with warm-up matches – and, yes, defeats – against the likes of England, France and the Netherlands.

Scotland will take part in the opening game of Euro 2024 when they line up against the hosts at Munich's Allianz Arena (AKA 'Fußball Arena München') on June 14, before fixtures against Switzerland and Hungary.



Top Che Adams, or Che Clarke? **Above** Coming to a Round of 16 near you soon...

Switzerland were also the opponents when the Tartan Army came closest to being at the business end of a European Championship, 28 years ago. Scotland have been one goal away from progressing from their group at five major tournaments: in 1974, 1982, 1986, 1990 and in 1996, when Ally McCoist's stunning strike in a 1-0 win over the Swiss looked to have secured a quarter-final berth.

Having drawn 0-0 with the Netherlands, then received plaudits for a gutsy showing in a 2-0 defeat to England, they seemed to be going through on goal difference. England were beating the Dutch 4-0 in their last group game. But then Patrick Kluivert struck, and Scotland were out again – on goals scored.

Even now, it still rankles with McCoist and his Euro 96 team-mate, Colin Hendry. Both believe the current crop can go one better.

"I think this is a really good chance for Scotland to make it through the group at a tournament, though I'm loath to put any more pressure on the boys than they've already got," McCoist tells *FFT*. "Four teams qualify in third place. If we can win a game – and we're more than capable of doing that – then we've got a chance of qualification. That would be the first time any Scotland team has done it. Why not this tournament?

"In 1996 I thought we'd done enough to qualify, particularly because, let's be honest, England did us a massive favour against the Dutch. They lost a late goal and I remember kidding David Seaman on, saying he had cost us qualification. He said, 'I think you'll find you did, when you put that shot over the bar after about 10 minutes'. It was very difficult to argue with him!

"That was a sore one, but it wasn't to be. Getting out of the group has maybe been a mental barrier for Scotland, because we've had some brilliant teams. In 1974 – I can remember that team – Billy Bremner was so unlucky not to score against Brazil. We beat Zaire and drew 1-1 with Yugoslavia.

"We've had some great teams who failed to qualify. In 1978, you had Kenny Dalglish, Graeme Souness and guys like that going to Argentina. The 1982 team was a good side, too. I'm desperately hoping this tournament can be the first one for the boys."

Hendry shares McCoist's frustration towards the past and positivity towards the





coming summer. "In my whole time as a supporter, then a player, Scotland's main issue was not scoring enough goals – going right back to attending Spain 82 with my family when I was 16," the ex-defender says.

"We hung in there for those first two games in Euro 96, but didn't have a goal to show for it. We were good that day against Switzerland as well, but one goal wasn't enough. It's incredible to think how close we came to going through when we had only one goal from three games.

"This is as good a chance as we've ever had, and the boys should feel like they can do it – especially after the way they beat Spain at Hampden, never mind the guts to come back and win in Norway."

McCoist and Hendry point to the same stand-out players, in their prime at the right time. "I think we have a better level of player at the moment," McCoist tells *FFT*. "Guys like Scott McTominay, John McGinn, Andy Robertson and Kieran Tierney are playing at the top level. They've been excellent for us."

Hendry agrees. "I'm reassured now that Andy Robertson and Kieran Tierney are back fit again," he says. "I also love our midfield, with John McGinn, Scott McTominay, Billy Gilmour and Callum McGregor.

"It says everything about the depth of quality in that area of the pitch that Lewis Ferguson had to work really hard to get the limited minutes he had, too, given he was one of the best performers in Serie A this season – a real driving force for Bologna."

Top Che (part 2) **Above** Adams is competing with Shankland, here, for a starting spot in Germany **Below** As one journey ends, another begins

In his second season since moving to Italy from Aberdeen, the 24-year-old was made Bologna captain and helped to put his side on course for a shock Champions League qualification – potentially the first in their history. Sadly, rupturing a cruciate ligament in April means he now won't feature for his country at Euro 2024.

Up front, there's a three-way battle to start, between Lawrence Shankland, Lyndon Dykes and Che Adams. "They all bring something different," McCoist says. "Shankland may be the best finisher; Dykes could potentially lead the line better than the other two; Adams might run in behind better. I don't think Stevie will play more than one at a time, so we've got options. If we could combine the three of them, we would have some striker!"

Pre-tournament friendlies against Gibraltar and Finland give Scotland an opportunity to end their winless run. Even so, McCoist tells us, "It would be wrong to start panicking about results. We've won 15 of our last 21 competitive games, and only two of our last 19 friendlies, so I'm hoping that statistic would tell us that we're ready for competitive games. I think we'll be OK."

Clarke has been happy for his players to soak up the credit during his two successful qualifying campaigns, but there's no hiding his influence. "He's done a great job," McCoist says. "He and John Carver have marshalled the players well. They look like a happy squad, who look forward to meeting up and being in each other's company. That helps."

Hendry draws comparisons between Clarke and the late Craig Brown, his manager at Euro 96 and France 98. "The players respect Steve and that's so important – it doesn't happen by accident," he says. "They look like a team. Off the pitch, they're having a laugh together, and they look like a tight group.

"Craig listened to what everyone had to say but he would canvass opinion from some of the older heads, like me, John Collins and Gary McAllister. Steve seems to have the same rapport with boys like Andy Robertson and John McGinn – and the same inspirational qualities. At Craig's funeral, Darren Jackson said to me that Craig made you feel like you could win every game; that you were on top of the world. Steve will have them feeling like that before they walk out against Germany."

Hendry can relate to captain Robertson, having led out Scotland himself against Brazil in the opening game of the 1998 World Cup. "I remember walking out at the Stade de France and feeling so proud," he recalls. "We saw our families and acknowledged both sets of supporters – we were all kitted out in our kilts. This was still 90 minutes before kick-off and the place was packed.

"Walking back up that tunnel for those final preparations, that's when the mentality really shifted. It's about the game, then. That focus kicks in automatically. Given the level he's used to, Andy will be no different.

"These boys have earned the right to enjoy the occasion. Then see where it takes them."

McCoist was talking on behalf of talkSPORT BET

"THEY LOOK LIKE A HAPPY SQUAD WHO LOOK FORWARD TO BEING IN EACH OTHER'S COMPANY – THAT HELPS"



ANDY ROBERTSON "THE WHOLE WORLD WILL BE WATCHING OUR TOURNAMENT OPENER AGAINST GERMANY"

Only one player has ever captained Scotland's men more than the Liverpool left-back. As well as breaking that record this summer, he's eyeing a repeat of the Tartan Army's fine qualifying campaign – but with a bit less rain this time...

When Scotland are at their best, they are as tenacious as they are technically gifted. No one embodies that better than their 30-year-old captain, Andy Robertson.

The rampaging Liverpool full-back leads by example in dark blue and is clearly as beloved by national team boss Steve Clarke as he is by departing Anfield gaffer Jurgen Klopp. Robertson might be off Klopp's Christmas card list, though, if he can help to inspire a memorable result against hosts Germany in the opening match of Euro 2024.

But that's the plan, heading into his second tournament as Scotland skipper. Robertson isn't content to simply make up the numbers. Settling has never been in his nature...

Does it feel any different leading Scotland into the Euros the second time around – as a person, as a player, as a captain?
It does, definitely – in a good way. When the last one took place, everyone was still trying to find their way back to some sort of normality and we had all of the restrictions around the games – how we could mix with each other as a group and, probably more significantly, the reduced allocation for supporters. This is more like it. Germany feels like a great host nation. My family and friends will all be there. My kids went to the games last time but they're older now and able to take it all in. It sounds like the Tartan Army are heading over in their droves, as you'd expect. It's one for everyone to enjoy.

How did you react when you were drawn to play in the opening game, with the eyes of the footballing world on you? It's reminiscent of Scotland taking on Brazil in the curtain-raiser at the 1998 World Cup.
There's no getting away from it – it'll be an amazing occasion. To open the Euros against the host nation is special. It's the type of game you want to be involved in and you know that everyone who loves football, across the globe, will be watching. Having said that, when it comes to matchday we have to be focused on the task at hand. It's the first game in our campaign: that's what really matters. We can enjoy the build-up, but from the first whistle it's about getting off to the best start we possibly can. We know from the last Euros that it helps to have a strong start to build early momentum.

Speaking of early momentum, Scotland came flying out of the traps in qualifying. Beating Spain at Hampden must be one of your most enjoyable nights in the game?
Spain stands out because we were at home, in front of a massive crowd, against a Pot 1 nation who are world-class all over the pitch. They've won these tournaments, never mind just qualifying for them. Beating Spain gave the whole nation the belief that we could go on and make it. It's when that excitement really started to build. I think the comeback win in Norway tops it for me, though. That's probably the most special game, for me, in a Scotland jersey. I think it was the manner of it – for the turnaround to happen so late on against a good team. The boys never gave in, and that winning goal put us in the driving seat to qualify.

What about the night in Glasgow against Georgia, in the downpour to end all downpours? With Georgia demanding that the match was abandoned, finishing that game – somehow – and claiming all three points was a pivotal moment for Scotland.
It was total carnage. The most torrential rain you can imagine in Scotland, even by our standards. Emotions were running high, as you'd expect, with all the confusion. Having to leave the pitch with so much at stake and not knowing whether we would get to play it to a conclusion. We had to try and keep our heads on straight to focus on the things we could control. When you think about it, the build-up to a big game like that is meticulously planned to the minute, for example in terms of when you eat and what you eat – everything was thrown out of the window at that point. I think we eventually finished up about 11.20pm, so the lads deserve all the credit in the world for getting that one over the line, as do the supporters who stayed and roared us on until the very end. That felt like a night when everyone was in it together.

Is there one image that sticks out?
One of our goalkeepers, Liam Kelly, trying to kick water off the pitch! When we came back out to warm up, the keepers were ahead of us, and I saw Kells doing his best to nudge the water out of the area, thinking that would make the difference. It's funny but



Below The June victory at home to Georgia was no damp squib, but it *was* damp

that attitude probably sums up the night. If there had been enough brushes, we would have grabbed one each and got stuck in.

What makes this group of players special?
After so long in international football's wilderness, no one can take back-to-back qualifications for granted. We've got no egos. No one thinks they're bigger than the cause. No one is any more important than the guy next to them, whether it's a regular starter or the third-choice goalkeeper. We all have the same goal. It sounds simple, but the closeness of the group is why we've been relatively successful. We've grown up together and it has been the same core of players from camp to camp. The same goes for the backroom staff. It's hard to create that environment, but if you can get it right then you're halfway there.

What stands out with Steve Clarke, the manager who has guided Scotland to those back-to-back qualifications?
The manager has been so good from the minute he came in. Maybe it wasn't obvious to begin with, from the outside looking in, because there wasn't that instant upturn in results. But we knew, internally, that real progress was being made. That confidence within the group was growing and we knew it was a case of 'when' and not 'if' it clicked. We haven't looked back since. The team has evolved, and he has been the driving force behind that. He is constantly trying to spot little things that can improve us. He also listens to the players when the time is right, which says a lot for him given his experience and standing in the game. He wants to know what we think we can do better and he takes it on board. Qualifying for two European Championships is great and I hope that's not the end of it. I feel there's more we can achieve if we keep doing the right things.

You're on the verge of being Scotland's most capped captain, having worn the armband 47 times, one fewer than George Young. Is that a proud personal landmark?
Someone told me that in the last camp. Anyone who knows me knows that personal accolades will always come second to how the team is doing – you don't get anywhere in football on your own – but it will be pretty special if I tick it off, given the captains who came before me. I grew up watching some of them, and the ones who were before my time have names and lasting legacies that carry a lot of weight. I hope I've got a lot more caps left in me.

You were 24 when you took on the role. Has your leadership style changed since?
Definitely. I'm a more experienced player and a more experienced captain. I was thrown in at the deep end and had to learn on the job. I think I take it in my stride now and deal with things differently – a lot better than I used to, but that's an age and stage thing. You'd have to ask the boys and the manager if they agree with that! It's still an honour. That feeling hasn't diminished one bit.



SCOTT McTOMINAY
"I DIDN'T NEED CONVINCING TO PLAY FOR SCOTLAND – I'D ALWAYS WANTED TO"

Former national team gaffer Alex McLeish braved one of the worst storms in history to reach Manchester for a crucial meeting in 2018, but the Red Devils midfielder tells *FourFourTwo* that his mind was already made up anyway...

No player did more to fire Scotland to Euro 2024 than Scott McTominay. The midfielder's all-action displays and seven goals in qualifying cemented his status as a driving force in the side.

If it feels as though he has sometimes had to work that bit harder for recognition at club level, during a testing, transitional phase for Manchester United, the same can't be said of the Tartan Army, who adore the 27-year-old. Born in Lancaster, McTominay also qualified to play for England, but he committed his future to Scotland in 2018 and was voted as the team's player of the year for 2023, after a qualifying campaign in which there was no shortage of candidates for the honour.

He was presented with the award by Manchester United's technical director, Darren Fletcher, a mentor to McTominay. Fletcher captained Scotland with distinction but would have given anything to trade places with his protégé and know the feeling of representing his country in a tournament. McTominay takes nothing for granted.

How big an influence has Darren Fletcher – one of the best Scotland players never to play at a major tournament – been on you?
He has helped me so much in my career, especially since Kieran McKenna and Michael Carrick left United. He's so honest with you. If you haven't played well, he'll tell you, but always in a constructive way, and he's also quick to tell you if you've played well. Plus, he knows when to have a laugh. He is a huge influence on me and, no exaggeration, one of the best guys I've come across in football.

He's in a unique position to advise you, as a Manchester United academy graduate who carried great responsibility with Scotland...
Darren is great at delivering a concise, simple message. He'll remind you what you're good at; that the team needs this or that from you. His standards are so high, in every respect. He is very forceful and people from the outside might not expect that. He helps to drive standards, day in, day out. He really cares about that legacy here and the same applies to Scotland.

Fletcher's not the only notable Scot with a Manchester United connection to made a big impact on you. Do you remember your first encounter with Alex Ferguson?
I was only a young kid when I first met him, so I remember being in awe of him at the time. Having said that, the respect only deepens the older you get, because you realise everything he did for United, Scottish football and the game in general. I would soak up stories from people like Jonny Evans and Tom Heaton, who were lucky enough to work with him from an early age. They speak so highly of Sir Alex. He has that aura about him, doesn't he? That can intimidate you. Even walking by the canteen, he'd ask, "Are you behaving yourself, son?" and that was enough! You'd go back to training, thinking, 'I want him to think I am doing a good job'. He just has it, whatever 'it' is. He's an icon. I would have loved to have played for him.

And then there's Brian McClair, another Scottish Manchester United hero who played a big part in your development at academy level...
What a character he is – a brilliant guy. I don't know if it was the Scottish connection, or if he thought that I had the chance to go and play for the first team at United, but whenever I'd go into his office for a chat, I always felt like he cared and that he made an effort to check up on me. He was class. He was such a big influence on my career as a young player.

We're reaching a bit here, but Jose Mourinho is another who has a real fondness for Scotland, after working on his coaching badges with the Scottish FA at the start of his career. What was your relationship like with him?
There's a picture in my grandparents' house of me making my debut in the Champions League, standing beside Jose Mourinho. They loved him because he gave me that moment. He gave me that initial opportunity, so he will always be a hero of mine. I'll be forever grateful for everything that he did for me.

Jose was on record as saying, "This kid has everything that I want" about you. Why do you think the two of you hit it off so well?
I remember that when I first started training with the first team, I got into an argument with a couple of the senior players over the way a small-sided game was going. Ashley Young was one of them and, trust me, he

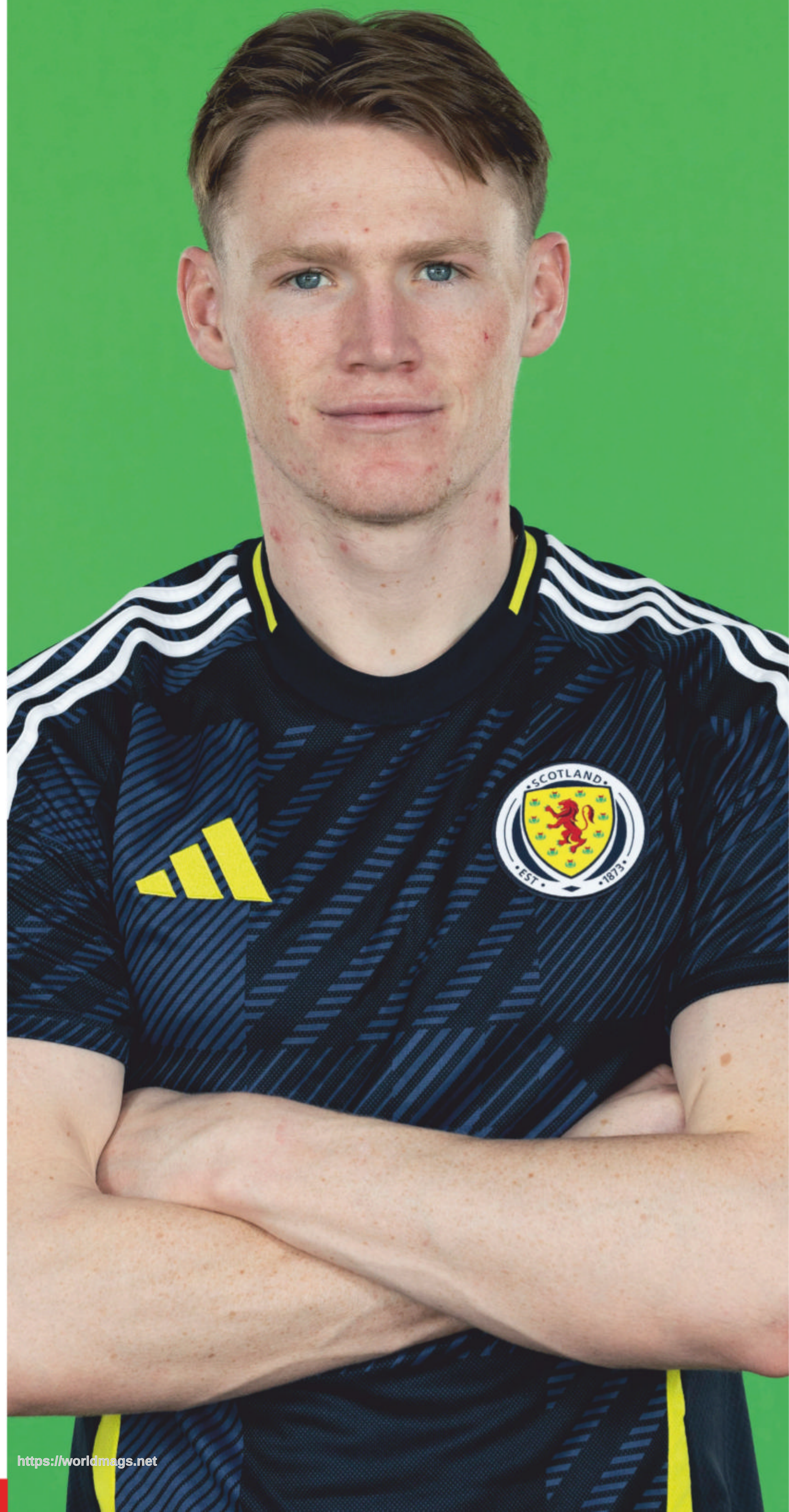
Below Playing for any other flag was never a consideration for McTominay



can handle himself. I was only 17 or 18 at the time, but I wasn't happy that our team was losing and maybe I went too far. Jose pulled me aside and said, "You can't speak to the senior professionals like that." He told me that they would respect me for standing up for myself and having that fire in the belly, but I had to get them onside first. I think he knew my reaction came from a good place – because I wanted to do well. It gave me a lot to think about when I went back to my digs that night. To be fair, probably didn't change too much and, looking back, maybe it was a test. He always took an interest. And he would talk about his experiences in Scotland in glowing terms.

Mourinho was the Manchester United manager when Scotland boss Alex McLeish was invited down to speak to you, braving one of the worst storms the country has seen in decades to make it. He tells a great story about going to extreme lengths to get to Manchester in one piece, only to feel a bit cheated when you said 'yes' to a call-up straight away...
Yeah! [*Laughs*] He came down to the training ground. I think he had a good relationship with the manager at the time. Truth be told, I didn't need convincing at all – playing for Scotland was always something I wanted to do, from an early age. I remember going to early regional development camps, but I didn't get my growth spurt until I was 18, so the timing just had to be right. Alex was brilliant – a really nice guy. I remember sitting in an office at Carrington while he explained how everything would work, but I was already sold. I wanted it, but he made a real effort and it made me feel part of something. I still have that feeling. Whenever I join up with Scotland, I have a real affection for all of the players and the staff.

This will be your second tournament with Scotland. The first was during a pandemic, when there were many heavy restrictions still in place. You must be looking forward to getting a 'proper' go at it in Germany?
It'll be amazing, especially for all of the Scotland supporters who have followed us all over Europe. They make a lot of sacrifices to be able to do that. People might not believe me but, as a group, we haven't talked much about the upcoming Euros beyond sorting out some of the practical elements – not yet, at least. We have been so focused on each camp and preparing as well as we could have for the next game. The manager reiterates that, and everyone buys into it. He is constantly pushing to raise standards as well. We took on tough friendlies, but that's the only way you'll get better. Whenever we've lost goals, we've been able to analyse them self-critically, instead of being too downhearted. It's important to be like that. We don't rest on our laurels because as soon as you do that, you become too comfortable, and in football, being comfortable is the worst position you can be in. It comes back to bite you. When the Euros come round, we will leave everything on the pitch.



BILLY GILMOUR
"BEING MAN OF THE MATCH AT WEMBLEY WAS A DREAM. I WANT MORE OF THE SAME"

The midfielder starred against England on only his third appearance for Scotland, in the Euro 2020 group stage. The 22-year-old hopes that his regular football with Brighton will help him to produce the goods again this summer...

Steve Clarke doesn't tend to dish out praise lightly, so on the occasions that he does, it's worth paying attention. Especially when that praise follows a 4-0 defeat.

Scotland earned many plaudits for their general play in the March friendly against the Netherlands in Amsterdam, but the late collapse that turned 1-0 into 4-0 did hurt. It was maybe no coincidence that Billy Gilmour – arguably the best player on the pitch that night – had been withdrawn before the landslide. Between bemoaning moments of slackness and emphasising the need to learn lessons from this exposure to ruthless, elite opponents, Clarke was unusually effusive in his praise of the Brighton midfielder.

"I took Billy off and it was harsh because that was his best game for Scotland – he was outstanding," the manager said. "Wearing the No.14 shirt in the Johan Cruyff Arena, that was nice. It shows that the regular football he's getting at Brighton in the Premier League is pushing him on. He's getting better and better, but we've always said that about Billy. He's one for the future, but he's also one for now."

The diminutive 22-year-old has coped with the burden of expectation since he was a much-talked-about teenage talent at Rangers, prior to a switch south with Chelsea. He came of age in a Scotland shirt at the last Euros, with a man-of-the-match showing against England at Wembley in only his third appearance for his country. And he believes he's even better equipped to deal with the big stage this time, in Germany...

How much are you looking forward to this summer's European Championship ?
I can't wait. It's going to be even better than last time because we won't have the issues with COVID and restricted crowds. From all of the messages I've had, it feels like the whole of Scotland is heading out to Germany, and I'm buzzing for them – friends, family, supporters. They all deserve to enjoy themselves. It will be a proper tournament. Germany will be good hosts as well.

Have you tried to block it out for the last few months, or let yourself take it all in?
A bit of both, because you have your club to focus on, as well as national team friendlies. But you're only human. In general, it's just great to see excitement around the Scotland national team. When I was growing up in Ardrossan, I kicked a ball about every chance I got – in the garden, in the park or in a more organised setting – but I don't remember seeing many kids wearing Scotland strips. Now I see them everywhere I go, and that's massive. It's a nice thought that so many kids have been inspired and their favourite players are now national team players.

Scotland had to go without this kind of platform for so long, but it's back-to-back Euros for this group of players and staff...
Last time out, the manager said – and everyone in the dressing room agreed – that we couldn't afford for it to be a one-off. We couldn't sit back, happy we'd qualified for one tournament. We had to build on it. That gave us added motivation for the qualifiers. It ended up being a really good campaign, with some amazing moments – beating Spain, obviously, and the late comeback to win in Norway. There's a real buzz about this group. We don't want to just make up the numbers; we want to compete and do ourselves justice. The manager sets the tone.

Steve Clarke has a lot of faith in you, bringing you into the squad just in time for the last Euros and sticking with you when you weren't playing club football as regularly as you have done this season. How big an influence has he been on you?
I owe the manager a lot. He stuck by me. He is loyal – very loyal. When I wasn't a first pick every week at club level, it was a concern that it'd impact being called up for Scotland – anyone who knows me knows how much that means to me. But he kept me involved and that goes a long way with a player. It makes you want to work twice as hard for them. I feel like I have his trust on the pitch and you never go out there without knowing exactly what your specific job is for the team. The manager is meticulous. Nothing is left to chance, and he deserves a lot of credit for what he's achieved with this group.

Some people question international football's relevance these days, given the hype surrounding the club game – that's clearly not something you subscribe to...
Genuinely, there's no better feeling for me than playing for Scotland – getting to pull on



Below Gilmour scored his first – and, to date, only – senior career goal against France, of all teams

that shirt and represent your family, your town, your country. I've felt and said the same since I was first involved with the Under-15s. Every time I saw my name on a squad list, I was buzzing. There has never been a single occasion, at any age level, when I've even considered pulling out of a game. It means too much to me and my family. Look around the squad and it's the same – we very rarely have call-offs from a squad. Everyone is desperate to play and stay part of it, and not just because there's competition for places. It might sound daft, but I even feel sad when camps are over, thinking that I won't see those players and staff members for another few months. That togetherness has probably been a big factor in back-to-back qualifications for the Euros.

You hear a lot that international managers have to try to replicate a 'club atmosphere' – it must be easier said than done when you don't have long together.
People ask me all the time what it's like and, honestly, we're like a family. Everyone is in this together. The manager trusts us and we trust him. There's a bond and mutual respect. He knows that we care, that we're dedicated and that we're professional, but he also lets us have fun when the time is right. Again, that trust goes a long way. I think that if you were new to the group, one thing you'd notice is that there are no cliques. Everyone mixes in.

Now that you're a bit older and wiser, how do you look back on the match against England in the last European Championship? You made a bit of a name for yourself with a man-of-the-match performance at Wembley...
I know I'll still have that excitement this time around. It won't be any different in that respect, but I also know I'll be better for the experience, because it doesn't get any bigger for a young Scottish player than being thrown in at Wembley against your rivals. I didn't think I would play at the tournament. COVID meant managers could take bigger squads, so I thought I'd be there for the experience and I was just concentrating on making a good impression. I worked hard in training and tried to soak in as much as I could from everyone. When I heard I was starting? Wow. I don't mind saying I was nervous, but in a good way. It focused my mind. I do remember walking out and seeing all of those Scotland supporters singing their hearts out. We had seen the videos of them taking over London, but seeing that inside Wembley will live with me forever. To make my first start for Scotland in a massive game like that... it's the stuff dreams are made of. I just wish I could remember more about the game itself, because that was a bit of a blur. The next thing I knew, I was looking at a Man of the Match trophy and trying to keep a straight face during TV interviews while my family were jumping about in the stands behind them. You can't buy those experiences. It's a privilege and I would love more of the same in Germany.
















30 GREATEST EUROS GAMES EVER

FFT counts down the European Championship's highlights, featuring tears, psychics and a very excitable Motty

Words Tom Hancock









30 REP IRELAND 1-0 ENGLAND

In 1988, the Republic of Ireland marked their tournament debut by beating England in their first match, as Ray Houghton's looping header separated the sides in Stuttgart. They later came within 10 minutes of eliminating the Dutch – eventual winners – to reach the semis, while England lost every game. Ouch. **THEY SAID** "You know, I wasn't a very good goalscorer" – Houghton, who also scored the winner against Italy at USA 94. If you say so.

29 SPAIN 2-1 USSR

Spain lifted their first major trophy in 1964 by beating the Euros' inaugural champions. The game looked set for extra time with the scores level at 1-1, but Marcelino had other ideas, heading in an 84th-minute winner. **THEY SAID** "We had to win at all costs; otherwise, there would have been a hunt for culprits" – Spain goalkeeper Jose Angel Iribar, referring to an era when the country was under the dictatorship of Francisco Franco.

Above "Aim for my mouth rather than my eyes if you can, Teddy"

28 GREECE 1-0 PORTUGAL

If we were judging it purely as a footballing spectacle, Greece's Euro 2004 Final victory against the hosts wouldn't be anywhere near this list, but it was *such* a shock. Towering striker Angelos Charisteas stunned Europe and etched his name into Greek mythology (take a look – he's just before *chimera*) by heading in Angelos Basinas' corner. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Cristiano Ronaldo crying. The stuff that memes are made of.

27 ENGLAND 2-0 SCOTLAND

The Euro 96 hosts won football's oldest rivalry to kickstart their run to the semi-finals. Alan Shearer broke the deadlock, and then came Paul Gascoigne's outrageous flick and volley, followed by that dentist's chair celebration. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Uri Geller, in a helicopter over Wembley, making the ball move from the penalty spot just before Gary McAllister kicked it and saw his effort saved by David Seaman. This definitely happened.

26 DENMARK 2-2 NETHERLANDS

It's one of football's great underdog stories: Denmark, who hadn't qualified for Euro 92, were drafted in late when Yugoslavia were banned, then only went and won the thing. They reached the final in dramatic fashion, conceding a late equaliser to Frank Rijkaard before knocking out the holders on penalties. **DID YOU KNOW?** Marco van Basten, perhaps fearing he could never top his goal in the last final, posted the only miss in the shootout.

25 W GERMANY 2-1 BELGIUM

In 1980 a new generation of West German players brought home the country's second European Championship, winning a classic final in Rome. Horst Hrubesch scored twice either side of Rene Vandereycken's penalty for Belgium, heading an 88th-minute winner. **THEY SAID** "We wouldn't have made it in extra time, because it would have been too much... it was very hot" – Hrubesch, having beaten a team captained by Julien Cools.








Above right The inspiration for Pajtim Kasami celebrates his place in history

24 DENMARK 4-1 RUSSIA

The Danes' Euro 2020 had been a nightmare, with Christian Eriksen's cardiac arrest in their opening fixture leaving the nation in trauma while they also lost at home to Finland and Belgium. They turned it around by thumping Russia in a cacophonous Copenhagen, going into the last 16 and ultimately the final four. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** The veritable thunderbastard from Andreas Christensen to put Denmark 3-1 up on an emotional night.

23 SPAIN 4-0 ITALY

Spain concluded a half-decade of dominance by making light work of Italy in Kyiv, winning the Euro 2012 Final by a record margin after glory at Euro 2008 and the 2010 World Cup. Facing 10 men for the final half-hour, La Roja scored as many goals as they had in four actually-quite-dull knockout games in 2010. **THEY SAID** "Ref! Respect for the rival, respect for Italia; it's 4-0" – Iker Casillas, appealing for an early final whistle. It worked as well.

22 W GERMANY 4-2 YUGOSLAVIA

Holders West Germany played party-poopers in the last four of Euro 76 by fighting back to beat the hosts, who had looked destined for the final. With just over an hour played in Belgrade, Yugoslavia were 2-0 in front, but Heinz Flohe's goal halved the deficit and then Gerd Muller forced an extra half-hour... **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Muller scoring once again in the 115th minute, before completing his hat-trick to seal victory.

21 FRANCE 2-1 ENGLAND

With 91 minutes on the clock, England are poised to begin Euro 2004 by defeating the holders. Then... well, two words: Zinedine Zidane. The French captain equalises with a sublime free-kick and converts the penalty conceded by David James thanks to a badly misjudged backpass by Steven Gerrard. *Bof.* **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Fabien Barthez saving David Beckham's penalty at 1-0 after 18-year-old Wayne Rooney's great solo run.

20 HUNGARY 3-3 PORTUGAL

Portugal won Euro 2016 by drawing six of their seven matches, and they flirted with elimination during their third group game. Hungary led three times, Zoltan Gera waking from cryogenic sleep to net a belter, but Nani and Cristiano Ronaldo rescued Portugal – the latter, twice, including with a fancy backheel. **THEY SAID** "This is what Cristiano's all about: he has to score because he's a winner" – his gaffer, Fernando Santos, after the... draw.

19 NETHERLANDS 2-0 USSR

Having come up short in the 1974 and 1978 World Cup finals, the Oranje finally tasted glory by winning Euro 88. After Ruud Gullit opened the scoring at Munich's unmistakable Olympiastadion, Marco van Basten scored a reasonably good second on the volley. **MOST NOTABLE MOMENT** Fine, Van Basten's strike from an impossible-looking angle was outrageous. Few other players would have attempted it. None would have succeeded.













18 YUGOSLAVIA 3-3 SLOVENIA

In 1991, Slovenia was part of Yugoslavia; at Euro 2000, they met as local rivals. Slovenia were cruising to a memorable upset in their first ever major tournament match: 3-0 up against 10 men with 23 minutes to go. Then Yugoslavia hit three goals in a frantic six minutes, with Savo Milosevic matching the brace from Zlatko Zahovic. Spoilsports.
DID YOU KNOW? Yugoslavia let in 13 goals in four games in reaching the quarter-finals.

17 ICELAND 2-1 ENGLAND

Defeat in Euro 2016's last 16, to major tournament debutants with a population of 330,000 (about equivalent to Bromley), was England's nadir. After Wayne Rooney's early penalty, Ragnar Sigurdsson and Kolbeinn Sigthorsson hit back within 15 minutes and Iceland eased to victory. Cue: Thunderclap.
THEY SAID "Does Roy Hodgson drop Joe Hart for the quarter-final?" – ITV chicken-counter Mark Pougatch at half-time, after Hart errors.

Above Are you not entertained? (Three Lions supporters, don't answer that)

16 TURKEY 3-2 CZECH REPUBLIC

Leading 2-0 with 15 minutes left, the Czechs were making it out of their Euro 2008 group at Turkey's expense. Then Arda Turan pulled a goal back and Nihat Kahveci scored in the 87th and 89th minutes, prompting *scenes* on the pitch in neutrality hotspot Geneva, and in the stands from less restrained Turkish fans.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT Petr Cech dropping the biggest clanger of his career in fumbling a cross for Nihat's leveller. Oops.

15 DENMARK 2-0 GERMANY

Oh, they may have escaped their Euro 92 group and ended the Dutch title defence in the semi-finals, but surely Denmark wouldn't beat world champions Germany in the actual *final*? With goals from John Jensen and Kim Vilfort in nearby Gothenburg, they would.
DID YOU KNOW? Having given Arsenal the impression he was some sort of prolific goalscorer, Jensen joined the Gunners weeks later, then scored once in 133 appearances.

14 FRANCE 2-1 PORTUGAL

As penalties loomed, Portugal fancied their chances of beating the world champions to the final of Euro 2000... until Abel Xavier was penalised for handball in the 117th minute. With golden goal in action, Zinedine Zidane just had to score the penalty. And he did.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT Portugal's players going absolutely nuts, with several receiving bans for manhandling the referee. A hugely controversial moment, and absolute bedlam.

13 ENGLAND 4-1 NETHERLANDS

Having failed to win a group game in both 1988 and 1992, England followed up victory over Scotland at Euro 96 by squeezing the Oranje. Braces from Alan Shearer and Teddy Sheringham set up a clash with Spain, and conceding at 4-0 eliminated the Scots, too, just to give England fans extra amusement.
THEY SAID "The best performance by an England team I played in" – Shearer. It's hard to disagree, especially given the competition.



12 SPAIN 5-3 CROATIA

The last 16 of Euro 2020 produced some rip-roaring games. Here, Spain were 3-1 up with five minutes to go, only for Mislav Orsic and Mario Pasalic to set up extra time, but Alvaro Morata and Mikel Oyarzabal got the job done for La Roja. Quality entertainment.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT Goalkeeper Unai Simon wafting his foot at 18-year-old Pedri's backpass instead of controlling it. Result: comedy own goal from the halfway line.

11 FRANCE 2-1 ITALY

As if reaching the final of Euro 2000 with a golden goal wasn't dramatic enough, France won it in the same fashion – this time, having equalised in the fourth minute of stoppage time. David Trezeguet then fired in the extra-time winner at De Kuip to make the world champions kings of Europe as well.
THEY SAID "Every time I close my eyes, I see the two chances I failed to take. I cannot forgive myself" – Alessandro Del Piero. Bless.

10 DENMARK 3-2 BELGIUM

Belgium were on course for the semi-finals of Euro 84 when they led Denmark 2-0 in their final group game. That was until they were stunned by an early edition of Danish Dynamite, whose comeback was inspired by Michael Laudrup and completed by Preben Elkjaer, with a coolly taken finish.
DID YOU KNOW? Denmark won without their best player: Allan Simonsen had broken his leg in the defeat to France a week earlier.

09 WALES 3-1 BELGIUM

Belgium were squandering a lead again in Euro 2016's quarter-finals, on the best night in Welsh football history. Radja Nainggolan's stunning opener in Lille was overturned by goals from Ashley Williams, Hal Robson-Kanu and Sam Vokes, and Wales were in the semis.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT Robson-Kanu's outrageous Cruyff turn, naturally (not that it seemed natural at the time), sending three Belgians for a hotdog with chips and mayo.

Above "This Golden Goal rule, c'est très bien!"

08 NETHERLANDS 2-1 W GERMANY

Semi-finals don't get much bigger than this: West Germany facing their bitter rivals in 1988. World Cup finalists two years earlier, the hosts were expected to win in Hamburg, but after a questionable penalty apiece, Marco van Basten won it at the death.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT The Dutch fans burning German flags in celebration, and goalscorer Ronald Koeman wiping his backside with Olaf Thon's shirt. Classy.

07 SWITZERLAND 3-3 FRANCE

Before their Euro 2020 last 16 clash against the world champions, the Swiss hadn't won a major tournament knockout match since the invention of the Biro (1938, since you ask). And yet, 3-1 down with 10 minutes to play, they took the tie to penalties – and won.
THEY SAID "I hope you're going to scold him" – Adrien Rabiot's mum to Kylian Mbappe's dad in the stands after his "embarrassing" decisive spotkick was saved. Time and place.













06 SPAIN 4-3 YUGOSLAVIA

Yugoslavia had already come from 3-0 down to draw with Slovenia at Euro 2000; their last group game went even crazier. They led three times, only for Gaizka Mendieta to level in the 94th minute and Alfonso to win it for Spain mere seconds later. That eliminated Norway, who haven't reached a tournament since.
THEY SAID "The line between disaster and heroism is extremely fine" – man of the match Pep Guardiola. Where's he these days?

05 GERMANY 3-2 TURKEY

After reaching Euro 2008's semis with a mad comeback win over the Czechs and shootout victory over Croatia having equalised in the 122nd minute, Turkey then led Germany 1-0, trailed 2-1, levelled late on and lost even later on to Philipp Lahm's goal. Time for a lie-down.
DID YOU KNOW? Lahm's five Germany goals (in 113 caps) included this last-gasp winner, the opener in a Euro 2012 quarter-final and the first goal of a home World Cup. Big. Stage.

Top right The face of a man who thinks he may have made a mistake – but Panenka hadn't

04 PORTUGAL 2-2 ENGLAND

Euro 2004 seemed like it might actually be England's year, especially when they led the hosts in the last eight. Then Wayne Rooney got injured, Spurs flop Helder Postiga scored, Sol Campbell had a late winner disallowed and they lost on penalties – nearly every classic England disaster, all in one game.
THEY SAID "Gary Neville did my head in" – David James on G-Nev trying (and failing) to motivate the goalkeeper before the shootout.

03 YUGOSLAVIA 5-4 FRANCE

We all love a nine-goal thriller, don't we? The European Championship's very first game is, even now, also the European Championship's highest-scoring game, as Yugoslavia roared back from 4-2 down in the 1960 semi-final in Paris. Three goals in a wild five-minute spell did the damage, Drazan Jerkovic scoring two.
DID YOU KNOW? After crowds of more than 25,000 for both semi-finals, France's defeat meant only 18,000 turned up for the final.

02 CZ'SLOVAKIA 2-2 W GERMANY

As world champions, West Germany were favourites to win Euro 76. Czechoslovakia, and particularly Antonin Panenka, had other ideas. Momentum was with the Germans when they sent the match to extra time in the 89th minute, but it went to a shootout – and the most iconic penalty of all time...
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT Panenka's Panenka: often imitated, never bettered. Football hadn't seen such brilliant audacity.

01 FRANCE 3-2 PORTUGAL

France won Euro 84's Final quite comfortably, beating Spain 2-0 on home soil to bag a first major trophy, but they got there in incredible fashion. With penalties looming in a Marseille cauldron, Portugal led 2-1, but Jean-Francois Domergue levelled and Michel Platini got his eighth tournament goal in just four matches.
MOST NOTABLE MOMENT John Motson almost spontaneously combusting as Platini scored, capturing the drama perfectly.



NEVER WRITE OFF THE GERMANS

The 2006 World Cup hosts had been abject for a decade but produced a summer of love that inspired a golden reboot – can the stumbling home nation repeat the trick 18 years on?

Words Ed McCambridge



"I can still hear Marco Bode shouting at me to pass him the ball, clear as day, screaming my name. But I had other ideas. I pushed the ball to the side, turned and hit it." This is the part of the story when Oliver Bierhoff always smiles. "It went in. Next thing, my team-mates are jumping all over me. We were European champions."

Bierhoff's extra-time Wembley winner against the Czech Republic at Euro 96 was the first ever golden goal in senior international football. "They should probably name it after me!" he tells *FourFourTwo* on a balcony overlooking the pitch at Berlin's Olympiastadion, where this summer's final will be held. "We were on top of the world."

He's only barely exaggerating. Euro 96 was the ninth time the Germans had reached the final of a major tournament in 13 attempts since 1972. Dominance doesn't do it justice. Brazil may always be the neutral's favourite, but (West) Germany had become the team everybody feared. It was with great surprise, therefore, that the wheels started to fall off.

Germany's 3-0 quarter-final drubbing to Croatia at France 98 preceded a humiliating group-stage exit at Euro 2000. As the core that had delivered the reunified nation's early '90s success drifted into retirement, there was a dearth of talented youngsters coming through to replace them.

"After France, some crucial players ended their careers," explains Bierhoff, who quit the national team himself in 2002. "Andreas Kopke, Jurgen Kohler, Jurgen Klinsmann: players that had guaranteed success for us previously. Germany were left with a small pool of talent to choose replacements. At the time, the Bundesliga had a foreign quota of more than 60 per cent. The national team had been winning tournaments, so we didn't really notice that the education of the next generation had stalled."

That a 39-year-old Lothar Matthaus played all bar 12 minutes of those disastrous three Euro 2000 games was a major concern for the German Football Association (DFB). Erich Ribbeck, the manager who'd insisted on selecting a geriatric Matthaus despite all evidence to the contrary, was swiftly sacked – leaving him with the worst win percentage of any Germany boss – to be replaced by Rudi Voller. Days later, Germany won hosting duties for the 2006 World Cup and the DFB began implementing sweeping change.

"After 2000, Germany started investing more in academies and training centres," continues Bierhoff. "We looked to arm our young players with the technical ability to win football matches, instead of merely the physical and mental skills. That decision bore fruit a decade later with the emergence of the next great generation."

Things got worse before they got better. A harrowing 5-1 World Cup qualifying defeat to England on home soil proved the nadir. The German press dubbed the defeat "*Das Debakel von Munchen*" and described the city's Olympiastadion as a "crime scene".

Though Germany would eventually top the group to not only qualify for the World Cup but even reach the final, many saw the latter as a fluke given the teams they faced: Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Ireland, Cameroon, Paraguay, USA and South Korea. When they finally met a top side in the showpiece, Brazil ran out comfortable winners in Yokohama. "That wasn't a vintage Germany team," concedes Bierhoff. "The playing style was poor and we rode our luck."

As Euro 2004 rolled around, attendances for Nationalmannschaft internationals were dwindling. "I made my debut against Hungary just before that tournament and I was so pumped to be selected that I didn't really notice how full the stadiums were," Lukas Podolski tells *FFT* now. "I was just really happy to be there. But there was a definite disconnect between the fans and the team."

Alongside fellow teenager Bastian Schweinsteiger and a 20-year-old Philipp Lahm, Podolski injected some much-needed







HOW EUROS HOSTS HAVE FARED

It's now been 40 years since a team lifted the Henri Delaunay trophy on home soil

1960	France	Semis
1964	Spain	**WINNERS**
1968	Italy	**WINNERS**
1972	Belgium	Semis
1976	Yugoslavia	Semis
1980	Italy	Semis
1984	France	**WINNERS**
1988	West Germany	Semis
1992	Sweden	Semis
1996	England	Semis
2000	Belgium	Group stage
2000	Netherlands	Semis
2004	Portugal	Runners-up
2008	Austria	Group stage
2008	Switzerland	Group stage
2012	Poland	Group stage
2012	Ukraine	Group stage
2016	France	Runners-up

(Euro 2020 was held across 11 countries)



"GERMANY RECONNECTED WITH ITS FANS. WE WOULDN'T HAVE WON ANYTHING WITHOUT THEM"



Clockwise from above "And we did it all without Lothar!"; Italia 90 saw German rule continue; the 5-1 nadir in Munich; Bierhoff hit the Euro 96 Wembley winner

pep into Germany's squad that summer but the tyros could do little to prevent another group-stage exit in Portugal. Having taken Germany to a World Cup final only two years earlier, Voller stepped down.

The Euro 2004 fallout revealed deep divisions within the DFB, which threatened to derail preparations for the home 2006 World Cup. A rebellion to overthrow president Gerhard Mayer-Vorfelder – described as "the root of evil" by vice-president and mutineer-in-chief Engelbert Nelle – centred around an autocratic leadership style and hesitation to implement the youth development changes required at the turn of the millennium.

The saga even prompted backlash from FIFA chief Sepp Blatter.

"If I think about the upcoming World Cup in Germany, it's not the time to question the whole structure of German football," said the Swiss, before performing his best Marvin the Martian impression. "If that does happen, FIFA will be very, very angry."

With the revolt eventually quashed, focus soon turned to who should replace Voller. Germany's shrinking talent pool wasn't limited to players. Ottmar Hitzfeld and Euro 2004-winning Greece gaffer Otto Rehhagel ruled themselves out, with Hungary boss Matthaus the only person to actively throw their hat in the ring.

The DFB opted instead for Matthaus' arch nemesis Klinsmann, a 39-year-old with no previously coaching experience who planned to remain living in the US. The legendary former striker revamped the DFB's backroom team, appointing Bierhoff as sporting director and called for a 10-year plan to modernise German football. To say Matthaus took the snub to heart would be an understatement.

"Klinsmann is already looking for excuses," he scribbled in his weekly column for tabloid *Bild*. "If you're talking about 10 years but 2006 is a disaster, you can say, 'I told you that it wouldn't work out so quickly'. I also hear he won't be in Germany every weekend and I think that's a problem." Hell bent on restoring positivity ahead of the 2006 World Cup, Klinsmann restricted *Bild*'s media access going forward. Hell hath no fury...

The players, at the very least, were pleased. "Jurgen came in and changed the mentality straight away," reveals Podolski. "He told us he wanted us to shake off the pressure, to play exciting football, to have fun and enjoy representing Germany again."

Klinsmann's first meaningful test was the 2005 Confederations Cup. The eight-team tournament saw many of Germany's newly built stadiums make their competitive bows.

"The fact we were about to host a World Cup really hit home that summer," recalls Podolski. "The new stadiums were incredible, but I think the fans still needed convincing."

Germany finished third, their solid showing undermined by Klinsmann's decision to alternate between experienced goalkeepers Oliver Kahn and Jens Lehmann. Germans aren't generally fans of instability and, by the turn of the year, reports surfaced that the two glovemen – seldom backwards about coming forwards – were refusing to speak to one another. The press pointed to Klinsi's lack of experience in managing personalities and, when a young Germany lost 4-1 in Italy in March 2006, the knives sharpened.

"People said Jurgen didn't know what he was doing, that we were too naive, that we were going to let the nation down," reflects Podolski. "When the tournament arrived, there was a negative atmosphere. We were nervous for our opening game."

Bierhoff, part of the backroom team agrees. "There was definitely a tension in the air," he confirms. "We had beautiful stadiums, tight security and even the weather was perfect. But there was a sense that Germany and its national team were disconnected somehow."

As it turns out, there's nothing quite like hosting a party to bring people together.

RESET BUTTON DRESSED AS LAHM

"The thing I remember most is the flags," says Podolski. "We hadn't expected that. Thousands of people, with flags and face paint, lined the streets and were cheering as we made our way to the stadium. Inside the bus, we were looking at each other in shock."

Germany and its flag have long had an awkward relationship. The Nazis and their modern far-right successors have turned national pride and symbolism into something many are ashamed of. Yet inside a sold-out Allianz Arena before their opening clash with Costa Rica, there they were. Thousands of Germany flags, fluttering in the June sun.

"The whole stadium sang the national anthem," remembers Bierhoff. "That hadn't really happened before. Singing the anthem is complicated for Germans, but we opened up that day. It helped us to say, 'We're proud of the nation again'."

Any concerns over Germany's ability to compete on the field were allayed just six minutes in, when defender Lahm cut inside his marker and sent a howitzer whistling into the top corner. Like a floor-filling first tune at a wedding, it was the moment the party really started. "That goal was so special," ▸

says an emotional Podolski, 18 years on. "All the pressure melted away in that moment. It helped to forge a bond between fans and players that lasted the whole tournament."

Germany won a wild encounter 4-2 before heading to Dortmund for their second group game against neighbours Poland. A late 1-0 win in front of another febrile home crowd preceded a 3-0 triumph over Ecuador in the capital that ensured Germany topped their group with three wins from three. By that point, Berlin's 'Biermeile' – a 100,000-capacity fan zone at the Brandenburg Gate, complete with lager tents and massive screens – had become the centre of the universe.

"We were shown loads of videos of the celebrations," says Podolski, who scored his first World Cup goal against Ecuador. "It was absolutely crazy. It gave us goosebumps to know the level of support behind us."

That belief increased as Germany swept past Sweden in the last 16, thanks to a brace from their nascent FC Köln forward. "Scoring those goals in front of nearly 70,000 fans, in the new stadium in Munich, and seeing the celebrations around the country afterwards was something I'll never forget," beams Podolski. "It's what you dream of as a kid."

If a quarter-final showdown against Argentina represented the toughest test yet, it would also demonstrate the squad's new-found unity. Trailing 1-0, Miroslav Klose's late header took the tie to extra-time and, ultimately, a penalty shootout in Berlin's Olympiastadion. Time to come together.

Lehmann, installed as Klinsmann's No.1 on the eve of the tournament, was handed a 'cheat sheet' by goalkeeping coach Kopke, denoting where each Albiceleste would likely shoot from 12 yards. Before Mad Jens had a chance to use it, though, Kahn embraced him. The custodians settling their differences on the pitch remains an iconic image of that summer to Germans.

"It was a great moment between two great goalkeepers who'd fought for the jersey," says Podolski, who scored from the spot as Germany held their nerve to win the shootout 4-2. "It showed the camaraderie we had during the competition."

Italy awaited in Dortmund's last four – two of European football's great nations locking horns for a spot in the final. It would go down as one of the matches of the tournament – a breathless, end-to-end encounter that somehow remained 0-0 until the 119th minute. With penalties drawing ever closer, a moment of Andrea Pirlo artistry found Fabio Grosso inside Germany's area; the defender curling a shot inside Lehmann's far post. Almost immediately, Alessandro Del Piero made it 2-0 to end any home hopes of a fightback. When the final whistle blew, Klinsmann's players, broken and exhausted, sank to the turf.

Getting knocked out of a World Cup semi-final, in your own "living room", as the Westfalenstadion is lovingly labelled, would once have induced despair. But as Germany's players dragged themselves back up for a lap of honour, the stadium serenaded their heroes with a joyous rendition of *You'll Never Walk Alone*. These were new sensations.

"It's fantastic what we've seen this month," a teary-eyed Klinsmann told reporters above the singing. "It's wonderful that football can stir these emotions, bring people together, create these moods." Germany would finish third after defeating Portugal in a raucous play-off atmosphere in Stuttgart.

"If you look back to what people had been saying after Euro 2004, and in the months before the 2006 World Cup, you appreciate what an achievement it was for us to do so well," says Podolski. "It was a magical summer, and the party at the Brandenburg







Clockwise from top left Lahm sparks chaos against Costa Rica; flags became a source of pride again; Grosso and Italy break German hearts in the semis

BABY-FACED TACTICIAN

Euro 2024's opening night will witness history in the dugout

No matter what happens this summer, Germany are set to break at least one record, as Julian Nagelsmann (right) becomes the youngest coach in European Championship history.

The current record is held by Srecko Katanec, who was 36 years and 333 days old for Slovenia's opening game of Euro 2000. When Germany face Scotland on June 14, baby-faced Nagelsmann will be 36 years and 327 days old – a whopping six days younger. He's already been a manager for nine years, though, first taking charge at Hoffenheim in 2015 at the ripe old age of 28. He'd started coaching at 20, when a knee injury curtailed his playing career.

The oldest gaffer ever to appear at the European Championship was Giovanni Trapattoni, who was 73 when the Republic of Ireland featured at Euro 2012.



Gate a week after the Portugal win was one of the happiest days I can remember."

The tournament would come to be known as *Das Sommermarchen*, or 'The Summer Fairytale'. Not only did it rekindle Germany's love affair with its national team, but it also regenerated the country's global image. "It showed us to be an open, friendly, fun and passionate country," says Bierhoff. "Our tournament slogan was, 'A time to make friends', and we really felt as if we did that."

By the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, a new generation of technically gifted players including Manuel Neuer, Toni Kroos, Mesut Ozil and Thomas Muller had burst on to the global stage, all benefactors of the DFB's post-millennium reboot. Alongside Lahm, Schweinsteiger and Podolski, they'd go on to lift the 2014 World Cup in Brazil under Jogi Löw, Klinsmann's 2006 assistant.

Podolski believes those glories would be impossible without the *Sommermarchen*.

"Everything has to start somewhere and our journey to becoming world champions has its origins in that summer," he says. "That was when Germany reconnected with its fans and made people proud to wave the flag again. We wouldn't have won anything without that connection."

RECOVERY FROM A LOW EBB

What Germany would give for another summer fairytale. The comparisons between the build-up to 2006 and 2024 are almost eerie. Exactly 10 years have again passed since the side's last major tournament title. In that time, the DFB have lurched from one crisis to the next, the production line of young talent has stalled significantly and a string of managers have flopped. Sound familiar?

"Germany's current problems can be traced back to 2016," *SportBild*'s chief football writer Tobias Altschaffl tells *FFT*. "It was clear at that summer's Euros that Löw's possession-based philosophy was holding the team back. The era of transition football had arrived. The DFB should have been bold and brought in fresh ideas at that stage."

Löw would lead the team again at Russia 2018, but Germany's hopes of defending their crown were dashed weeks before a ball was kicked, thanks to a national row over citizenship and multiculturalism. It began when standout midfielders Ozil and Ilkay Gundogan accepted a joint invitation to meet authoritarian Turkey president Recep Tayyip Erdogan at a London hotel. Politicians rebuked the pair – also proud holders of Turkish citizenship – over the meeting and accused them of being used as pawns in the politician's re-election campaign. Even the DFB turned against them.

The saga dominated headlines during the lead-up to the tournament, with some calling for both to be dropped. Germany crashed out in the group stage and Ozil, who refused to apologise, received hate mail and threats from fans. "I'm German when we win, I'm an immigrant when we lose," he sighed, before retiring from Nationalmannschaft duty at the age of 29.



"IF WE THINK, 'THE LAST FEW TOURNAMENTS WERE ST', THAT DOESN'T DO ANY GOOD"**

Above Podolski lifts the big one in 2014 after starring in 2006

Bierhoff admits to errors. "The DFB has regrets," he tells *FFT*. "Firstly for Ilkay and Mesut, who did a lot for German football. They opted to play for us, not Turkey, and that's not always an easy decision. The other regret is for what it did to the national team that summer. We should have handled things differently."

Remarkably, Löw held onto his job for Euro 2020, a tournament Germany limped out of in the last 16 to England. It was another mistake. "There's nothing to indicate we made the right decision keeping Jogi on," says Bierhoff. "We should have refreshed."

The man selected to replace him in the summer of 2021 was his former assistant, Hansi Flick, who'd led Bayern Munich to a sextuple in 2019-20. Things started brightly, with seven straight World Cup qualifying wins, but when Qatar 2022 rolled around, Germany again exited at the group stage.

"It was a complete surprise and really disappointing," says Bierhoff, instrumental in Flick's appointment. "Sometimes you're just left saying, 'How can this be? How can this happen?' You simply can't exit in a World Cup group stage with that manager and those players. I was responsible, so I was as hurt by that failure as anyone."

Bierhoff agreed to have his contract with the DFB terminated following the Qatar catastrophe but, again, the coach remained. It would prove to be another poor decision – Germany lost friendlies to Belgium, Poland, Colombia and Japan in 2023, with Flick finally put out of his misery in September, just nine months ahead of this summer's home tournament. Back to square one.

"Maybe that was the wake-up call Germany needed," ponders former star Podolski. "The team spirit hasn't been there in recent years and that has to change now. But I'm confident things will be different under the new coach."

That man is Julian Nagelsmann who, aged 36, has become the youngest Germany gaffer since Otto Nerz in the 1920s, signing a short-term contract until this July. He'll be the country's third different manager in as many major tournaments. The former Hoffenheim, RB Leipzig and Bayern Munich coach – known as much for his painstakingly detailed training sessions as his snappy dress sense – has made turning Germany into a "tight-knit group again" his number-one pledge ahead of Euro 2024.

Early defeats against Turkey and Austria had supporters fearing another humiliating summer, but some big decisions ahead of March's friendlies have restored faith. Among them, Nagelsmann convinced Toni Kroos to come out of international exile. In his first games back, the Real Madrid star played a key role in impressive wins over France and the Netherlands.

"I was worried for Nagelsmann, but recent results speak for themselves," says Bierhoff, who remains an ambassador for the Euros. "He's a bright young coach and isn't afraid of upsetting a few people if that's what it takes to start winning again."

While pessimism remains around the lack of quality youngsters breaking through at Bundesliga clubs, there is hope in the form of teenage playmakers Florian Wirtz and Jamal Musiala, already his nation's most important player at 21. "The critics are right about the number of players we're producing," laments Bierhoff. "We don't have the talent pool we did in the past. But Jamal and Florian are outstanding. They can make the difference."

Though still far from optimistic, the general mood in Germany towards this summer's Euros, and what it might do for the nation, has drastically improved since the arrival of Nagelsmann. "Those wins against France and the Dutch have definitely made a few more people believe that this could be another *Sommermarchen*," says journalist Altschaffl. "France are the team to beat and we just did that, so there's a feeling that Germany will be competitive at the very least."

For Podolski, Germany's third most-capped player, there can be no excuses when the tournament kicks off against Scotland on June 14. "If we sit around thinking, 'The last few tournaments were s**t so we could be s**t again', that doesn't do any good," he says. "Fans need to get behind the team as they did in 2006, wave the flags and put on the best party they can."

Bierhoff agrees. "I truly believe 2024 will be another *Sommermarchen*. I know what this tournament means to people. A good summer could pave the way for another decade's success. I hope, when that final chance falls inside the box, it's a German under it." He pauses. "Just as it was in 1996."

“IT’S THE FIRST TIME PORTUGAL HAVE WON EVERY GAME IN QUALIFYING – WE CAN GO FAR”

Manchester United’s Diogo Dalot has shone for his country under new Selecao boss Roberto Martinez. Via the circus, big dogs and ball boy capers, the versatile defender explains what success this summer would mean...

Words Andy Mitten



Diogo Dalot is early – 15 minutes early, to be precise. Well before our scheduled start time at Manchester United's Carrington training ground, *FourFourTwo* gets a pleasant surprise as the Portuguese defender arrives to greet us, ready to chat.

Across the Red Devils' turbulent campaign, Dalot's personal form has impressed to such an extent that he's among the favourites to be named the club's player of the season. Just about the only defender at the club not to get injured during 2023-24, he turned 25 the day after a starring role against Liverpool in the FA Cup in March, his buccaneering raids from full-back a vital part of United's attacks.

This summer, he also has the small matter of Euro 2024 to look forward to. After forcing his way into Portugal's starting XI midway through the 2022 World Cup, Dalot helped his country become the only nation to reach the tournament with a 100 per cent record during qualifying.

Having recently become a father, too, he's loving life. Little wonder he's smiling as he says, "Let's talk!" Over to you, then, Diogo...

How are you feeling about Euro 2024?
Very excited. We were disappointed after the World Cup in 2022, where we expected to go further. Euro 2024 qualifying was perfect, both in the way we played and the number of goals we scored [36, seven more than any other nation]. It's the first time Portugal have qualified by winning every game. I'm excited – we have a good team that can go far.

Which results stung in Qatar?
Losing 1-0 in the quarter-finals to Morocco. We beat Ghana and Uruguay in our opening World Cup games to go through after two matches, then beat Switzerland 6-1 in the last 16. I felt pretty confident going into the quarter-final. We did enough to win it, but the result is the result. Morocco had a great World Cup. I've since spoken to [United team-mate] Sofyan Amrabat about the game. They knew on paper they weren't better than us, but were a real team in how they delivered together. They communicated well on the pitch, they stayed close to each other. It was difficult for us to find spaces against a side who really fought. They scored their goal in the first half and it was difficult for us to get back into the game.



How's the mood now in the Portugal team?
I think this is the best mood I've known since I joined the national team. Competition for places is high, training levels, too. I have to credit the coach for giving us that mentality. We train like we play.

Describe your manager, Roberto Martinez.
A pleasant surprise. I didn't know him before, but I'd say now that if I'm ever a manager, I'd like his personality. I like his communication, the dynamic in training, the way he thinks about football and conducts himself. It's not easy to be a foreign manager, especially in Portugal. We can be really patriotic with our managers, yet Roberto learned how to speak perfect Portuguese, he learned our anthem. That impressed everybody. He's a complete manager and he's a joy to work with. I hope we can win things together.

Which players should we watch out for?
A lot of players are now in a good phase. If our collective is at its best, the individuals will come out, and we're talking about some of the world's best players. Cristiano Ronaldo, who has featured more than 200 times for Portugal, will always be a threat. Bernardo Silva, Bruno Fernandes, Joao Felix, Rafael Leao and more. We have quality, we have leaders.

Why does a country of roughly 10 million people produce so many top footballers?
Our culture. When you grow up in Portugal, you're pushed to at least try to play football. You're born as a fan of a club. In my family, you're born with a Porto season ticket. You need to be a supporter, to have a club, to like football. There's natural talent, too. Portugal has always produced some of the greatest





PERFECT PREPARATION

Only nine countries had previously reached the European Championship with a perfect winning record during qualifying

USSR 1960
The Soviets only had to win two matches to reach the inaugural finals. After beating Hungary home and away, they had a walkover against Spain, barred from travelling to Moscow by dictator General Franco, amid Cold War tensions. The USSR then won the tournament, seeing off Yugoslavia in the final.

France 1992
No team qualified for the Euros with a 100 per cent record for 32 years before Michel Platini's Bleus did it in 1992, aided by Jean-Pierre Papin and Eric Cantona. After eight wins from eight, they smashed the tournament, right? Er, no: they didn't win a game, crashing out in the group stage. *Sacre bleu*!

Czech Republic 2000
The 1996 runners-up must have been confident of going one better when storming their Euro 2000 qualifying group. They beat Denmark at the tournament, but only after losing late on to the Netherlands in Amsterdam, then to world champions, and eventual winners, France. With that, they were out.

France 2004
Trying to retain the title, Les Bleus won their four home qualifiers with an aggregate scoreline of 19-0. Greece, Angelos Charisteas' forehead especially, proved a trickier obstacle at the tournament – France lost 1-0 in the quarter-finals before boss Jacques Santini moved to Tottenham. That went equally well...



Clockwise from top left Dalot's instincts yield top attacking returns; defeat to Morocco was hard to take; Martinez has inspired Dalot; squad unity is vital

footballers in the world and it's not only players. Portugal produces great coaches, and even sporting directors and physios.

Did you have a choice in supporting Porto?
No. The family were crazy about Porto and went to games. I began going with my dad when I was five, then played for Porto from seven. I saw Lionel Messi's Barcelona debut, a friendly to open Porto's Estadio do Dragao. I became a Porto ball boy – I was behind the goal when Cristiano scored that amazing long-range strike for United in the Champions League in 2009. We speak about Portuguese football at United. Our coach Benni McCarthy was at Porto, Bruno Fernandes at Sporting and Victor Lindelof at Benfica.

Describe your best moment as a Porto fan.
Kelvin's 92nd-minute winner against Benfica to help us win the league unbeaten in 2013. I was behind the goal as a ball boy, and fan. When he scored, I left my ball and jumped into the fans to hug them. Some supporters ran onto the pitch. It was madness. Then I was worried where my ball was – you had to return them at the end of the game, but I found it! Bruno and I argue about Sporting and Porto. He was playing for Sporting when I first played against them for Porto. He says I gave a penalty away: I didn't! We still argue about this, but it's all friendly. We're just fans now who play for another team.

You joined Manchester United aged 19 in 2018, but moved to Milan on loan for the 2020-21 campaign. How tough was that?
I played loads of minutes, which I needed, as I'd not played regularly for almost a year and a half. Culturally it was important, too – to play in another league and learn a new language. Milan is a cool city, but because of COVID, most things were closed.

Milan icon Paolo Maldini was the technical director. What tips did he give you?
He's a cool guy and his presence as a director was good for us. He was close to the players, but knew his boundaries. He wouldn't step into the manager's decisions and contradict him, but he'd say, "You're playing well but you ▸

Germany 2012
Jogi Löw's men won 10 out of 10 to reach Euro 2012, then three out of three in the tournament's Group of Death, defeating Portugal, Denmark and the Dutch, followed by Greece in the quarters. They didn't reckon with Mario Balotelli, though. Super Mario struck twice for Italy in the last four. Why always him?

Spain 2012
Under Vicente del Bosque, La Roja were near-unstoppable for four years, lifting the 2010 World Cup after winning every qualifier, followed by another 100 per cent record en route to Euro 2012, which they promptly won. They did draw their opener with Italy, but faced the Azzurri again in the final… and battered them 4-0.

England 2016
Yes, the only time the Three Lions have won every Euros qualifier was before 2016, when Roy Hodgson's men cruised past Switzerland, Slovenia, Estonia, Lithuania and San Marino. In such form, nothing could go wrong: apart from drawing with Russia and Slovakia in the group stage, then losing to Iceland. Ah.

Belgium 2020
Before repeating the feat as Portugal manager this time, Roberto Martinez won every game with Belgium to reach Euro 2020: his record in Euros qualifiers now stands at P20, W20, scored 76, conceded five. Belgium beat San Marino 9-0, but lost in the quarter-finals at the tournament itself to the eventual champions…

Italy 2020
Belgium's conquerors were Italy, who'd also won every qualifier, during a 27-game unbeaten pre-tournament run. After Mancini triumphed in the duel of Roberto Ms, the Azzurri went and bagged the trophy to become only the third team to win the Euros following a perfect record in qualification. *Fantastico*!



"I CONSIDER CR7 A FRIEND, YET IT SOUNDS SURREAL – HE WAS MY IDOL"

I consider him a friend, yet it sounds surreal because he was my idol, my reference, for years. I first met him properly at Euro 2020 and any time I spend with him makes me feel richer in terms of knowledge. I can draw from his vast experience, talent and wisdom.

Is it true that some of your family members were in a circus?
Yes! The name Dalot is French, from a circus family. My mother traced the history and thinks they stopped in Portugal. That's where everything started.

Are you optimistic about the future of Manchester United?
It's been a difficult campaign but I'm more hopeful than in the past, especially after the meeting with the new co-owners [INEOS]. They're here to help us, they have a good vision for the future and I feel like we can achieve good things. I want to be a part of getting Man United back to the top. I couldn't leave this place without feeling that United are winning once again. Last season, we had a taste with the League Cup – winning that was my high point so far at United. But that's not enough for a club like this. Even if you win four titles in one season, there's pressure to do the same again the next. It's been tough, especially for the supporters, but the players suffer with the fans as well. I'm genuinely hopeful we're going to be on the right track.

What's Erik ten Hag like?
We clicked straight away. I've had plenty of managers during a short career – some you get on with immediately, others you must show that you deserve to play. Erik and I see football the same way. I can adapt to what he wants and take different roles in different positions, which helps him when players are not available. He has a player who knows what he wants and I have a manager who trusts and believes in me. I'm still improving.

How important is your ability to play in different positions, even in midfield, for Manchester United and Portugal?
I've done that a lot – I can play right- or left-back – and am much more confident doing it. Playing regularly, as I have this season, is the best reward. I've played about 150 games for United now and feel better than I ever have here. I want to improve in all areas. On the pitch, doing things at the right moments, and off the pitch, in how my body recovers. The biggest thing is playing games. You learn from what you do well and what you don't do well. That's how you grow as a footballer.





could do this better." Sometimes it wasn't just technical advice, but mental messages, like, "Be more patient" or "Try to focus on this situation". When I arrived, he spoke to me in English, but I asked him to speak to me in Italian as I improved.

Did that loan help back at Old Trafford in 2021-22? You played 30 times that season...
I came back more confident but only started to play more when Ralf Rangnick arrived. The end of that season, when we finished badly, was my lowest point as a United player and we felt a bit hopeless. When Erik ten Hag arrived, things improved and I continued to play. Off the field, I was settled in Manchester after returning from Milan: my first year in 2018 had not been easy because the weather was so different to Portugal. That was a bit of a shock, as life there is usually outside. I was away from friends too, so I had to build new relationships and meet new people, which takes time. But now I have good friends here – from the team, I'm friends with Antony, Casemiro, Licha [Lisandro Martinez] and Bruno, plus David de Gea when he was here.

What's life like now?
I'm now a father to a girl, Clara. One of the best experiences in my life so far. We have two dogs, one German Shepherd and one

Clockwise from top United's Portugal contingent have a strong bond; Dalot and Ten Hag get on well; "Please, sir, can I play some more?"

Dobermann. Big ones. I love padel tennis and have a padel centre in Porto, near Boavista's stadium, but I don't play during the season because I don't want any physical problems.

Who are the best five Manchester United players at padel, in reverse order?
I've not seen them all, but I'd say Casemiro in fifth, only because he was in Spain a lot and must have played padel. Fourth, Rashy [Marcus Rashford] – I've only ever seen him play ping-pong, but he's good! Third, Bruno. Second, Licha. First, me. I own a padel centre, after all! [*Laughs*]

What influence has Jose Mourinho had on your career?
A big one. He convinced me to leave Porto and join United and gave me the confidence only he can give. He has a unique way of communicating – he can make you feel the best, or worst, player in the world. It was a shame I only had a few months working with him at United, but I'm in contact with him and will always appreciate what he did.

Have you ever done an interview in which Cristiano Ronaldo's name hasn't come up?
[*Laughs*] I've never actually said this before, but Cristiano is the most influential person I've ever had in football. On and off the pitch.


UKRAINE
Old School

Since Russia's invasion, 'Glory to Ukraine' has been a battle cry not only for the country's army but also its national team. Unable to play at home, Serhiy Rebrov's charges reached Euro 2024 roared on by a fanbase whose devotion has never been stronger

SLAVA UKRAINI

Words Michael Yokhin

November 2021. Three friends from Kharkiv decide to support Ukraine in their last fixture of 2022 World Cup qualifying. Their team must beat Bosnia-Herzegovina in Zenica to finish second ahead of Finland and reach the play-offs – Danylo, Radik and Vlad Zhuk all want to be there.

They don't plan the trip in detail, though, and only buy air tickets to Budapest, without the slightest idea of how to travel the remaining 287 miles to central Bosnia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it turns out there are no direct buses and trains. They instead go to Croatian capital Zagreb, then find a driver to Zenica on carpool app BlaBlaCar. Returning proves even more problematic.

"We thought we'd be able to join someone from Ukraine on a bus or in a car, and asked countless people during the second half, but there were no places at all," Danylo tells *FFT*. "We won 2-0, but our mood wasn't perfect. It was 11pm, everyone left, and we stayed behind with very little money. We took a taxi north to Travnik, then tried to continue by hitchhiking, but nobody wanted to stop for three suspicious-looking men. We spent the entire night at a petrol station, before finally buying tickets for a rather weird bus to Zagreb. When we got to Budapest, we were knackered, but at least made it to our plane.

"Just three months later, something like that simply wasn't possible. I was a student, we all had jobs – we would never have imagined we were about to become soldiers."

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine, and their lives changed in an instant.

"When the war started, an entire group of Metalist Kharkiv fans went to the regional state administration building, armed and ready to defend our homeland," explains Danylo. "Those were our headquarters. On the morning of March 1, the Russians fired rockets at our city and hit the building. It ruined the first floor. Vlad was on the street at that moment, and ran to rescue people from the ruins, which were then hit by another rocket 10 minutes later. He died while trying to help others. His body was only recovered three weeks later.

"He was a very positive guy, who had a lot of friends and helped everyone. As a fan, Vlad loved inventing slogans and songs. He was the leader of the Glory Juniors ultras group that supported Metalist Kharkiv and the national team, and was our drummer in the stands. It was devastating to lose him. Two days later, on March 3, I lost another close friend and Ukraine fan, Artem Pevko, who was killed by another Russian rocket that hit the administration building."

Danylo used to support his country from the stands, but for two years could only do so from afar, while serving in the army. As soldiers, he and Radik prefer us not to use their full names. For the Euro 2024 play-off semi-final this March, he was allowed to travel abroad again for the first time. Again, it was against Bosnia in Zenica.

"It was difficult psychologically to leave the country at such a difficult time, but our commander said it was OK because we had fulfilled all of our missions at the time – so, myself and Radik travelled to Zenica again, without Vlad," says Danylo. His voice crackles with emotion. "We recalled our troubles from 2021 with huge smiles on our faces, because they seemed so negligible compared with the war. We even took a photograph at the gas station where we spent that sleepless night, and remembered Vlad. We miss him and Artem very much, and still think of them all the time."

AN ESCAPE FROM REALITY

Vlad and Artem are among the first of 250 names commemorated by the Stand of Heroes charity. The foundation's mission is to make contact with the families of football fans who have died protecting Ukraine, provide financial and emotional support and accompany them on trips to national team matches. Thanks to them, Vlad's parents and Artem's girlfriend attended March's play-off final against Iceland in Wroclaw, Poland, when Ukraine qualified for Euro 2024.

"When Stands of Heroes was established, we developed the concept of the Football Family," Kristina Honcharenko, one of the foundation's leading figures, tells *FFT*. "There was no such phenomenon in Ukraine before, but we wanted those who lost their loved ones in the war to feel part of a big family, including supporters, players, coaches, sports journalists, officials and many people from the world of football.

"The families of our fallen friends are not left alone. The pain of loss will not go away, but we're trying to do something for them. I have repeatedly heard from them that it's

Clockwise from below Ukraine celebrate booking their Euros spot; cities have been ruined; squad togetherness is essential; Vlad's parents and Artem's girlfriend display a banner to commemorate their fallen family



important to continue their loved ones' life stories. The dead soldiers loved the national team with all their hearts, and their families are united by the desire to keep supporting it. There are no international matches in Ukraine nowadays, but taking them on trips abroad is hugely important.

"It fills everyone with positive emotions, especially when the team wins. The football community has never been as united as now. The day after beating North Macedonia in Prague during the qualifying group stage, the families met with the players and coaches, who expressed their thanks for the support."

Several of those players and coaches hail from areas of Ukraine that are now occupied by Russia – as many as eight of the squad that beat Iceland to reach this summer's finals, plus coach Serhiy Rebrov, from Horlivka in the Donetsk region.

The country's most successful club in recent times, Shakhtar Donetsk, were forced to leave the region for Lviv, Kharkiv and, in 2020, the capital Kyiv, when war broke out in the Donbas in 2014. The Moles topped the table when the 2021-22 season was curtailed because of Russia's full-scale invasion, and bagged a 14th Ukrainian title last term when matches restarted behind closed doors. UEFA deem it unsafe to play international or European fixtures in the country.

Since the restart, sirens have sometimes interrupted Premier League fixtures, forcing players to head to an air-raid shelter – one match between Oleksandriya and Dnipro took four hours and 36 minutes to complete.

"In the first months of the full-scale war, football was completely absent from my mind," adds Honcharenko. "My thoughts were only about the war, and helping the boys who were fighting. Then local leagues resumed, and attention to football returned – that included national team matches.

"Ukraine games, plus those of my beloved Chornomorets Odesa, help me to escape from the tensions of real life for 90 minutes. It's not always possible, though. I watched the match against Bosnia on TV at home during a drone attack on my city. According to the safety rules, I had to be in a shelter, but when the sky was quiet, I still ran to the screen to watch the game for at least a few minutes. My love for football is too big – I'm ready to take some risks for it."

After travelling to Wroclaw for the play-off final, Honcharenko saw Ukraine score twice in three minutes with time running out, the 2-1 win a repeat of the come-from-behind victory in Bosnia just five days earlier. Such character has become a trademark.

"During the war, winning on the pitch is more than just football," she says. "Soldiers fighting against the enemy's superior forces want the players to fight on the field as well. Everyone understands that the national team is important for the prestige of the country, especially in such difficult times.

"The players don't disappoint us. We were unlucky losing to Wales in the play-off final for the 2022 World Cup, and didn't beat England and Italy in the Euro 2024 qualifiers, despite playing well. But now we're going to the Euros anyway, and it's massive."

"WE GET SCORE UPDATES MID-BATTLE"

Stand of Heroes is just one initiative that focuses on football to help the nation. Dmytro Dubas and Mykola Vasylkov, who have used the national team's matches around Europe to raise funds for the army, promote the Ukrainian cause and help refugees.

"I have three restaurants in Kyiv, and we started providing food to the military forces, ▸



"THE TEAM'S SUCCESS IS A RAY OF LIGHT DURING VERY DARK TIMES FOR UKRAINE"







police and hospitals immediately after the enemy attacked our country," says Dubas.

A passionate Dynamo Kyiv fan, he goes to "every Ukraine match abroad" – a long list of venues during the past two years. In Euro 2024 qualifying, the Blue and Yellow played in nine different countries: five away matches, plus 'home' fixtures in Slovakia, Poland, Czech Republic and Germany, hosting Italy in their last group game in Leverkusen. They played this summer's hosts too, drawing 3-3 with Germany in Bremen in March 2023.

"That was memorable for many reasons," says Vasylkov. "It was Germany's 1,000th international fixture, and we were proud that they chose Ukraine. Germany support us in the war – for that game, we took a big banner with a picture of a leopard, thanking the Germans for the Leopard 2 tanks they sent us, and asking them to provide more.

"We also had a big march of Ukrainian fans together with the Germans, on the banks of the river near the stadium, and organised a friendly match between German supporters and a team of Ukrainian refugees living in Germany. There was a big auction, with most of the money raised used to buy medical equipment for hospitals near the frontline.

"We sell national team T-shirts signed by the players, and every time the money is collected for a different cause. Ahead of the play-off final against Iceland in Wroclaw, there was an event with the aim to purchase two or three ambulances."

Back in Ukraine, soldiers enjoy hearing the reports of such fundraising, and love seeing the national team even more.

"I grew up in the Donetsk region, moved to the city aged 16 and have always supported Shakhtar," says Vitalii Ovcharenko, who serves in Ukraine's infantry. "Before the occupation started in 2014, I had a season ticket for Shakhtar's home matches and frequently travelled to support the national team across the country, especially in Kyiv.

"I really miss those times. I miss going to our beautiful Donbas Arena. The dream is that we liberate Donetsk one day, then football will return home. Now we're fighting to defend our homeland, and follow every national team match on our computers and mobile phones, using the internet or Starlink."

He shares the unique feelings of following national team matches during battles. "We try to watch all the games live if possible. At times, some of us are on a combat operation so there's updates about the matches on the walkie-talkie," he says.

"The results aren't quite as important at the moment – the most crucial thing is that the players fully understand what cause they're playing for. I'm delighted Ukraine





"IF WE'RE ON A COMBAT OPERATION, WE GET GAME UPDATES ON THE WALKIE-TALKIE – THAT HELPS"



RUSSIA: A TEAM IN THE WILDERNESS

Invaded and unable to play on home soil, Ukraine have taken to the field for 19 internationals since February 2022 – Russia, by contrast, have only played 10.

Soon suspended from FIFA and UEFA, Russia were banned from playing a 2022 World Cup play-off semi-final at home to Poland, who went on to qualify, and were also removed from the Nations League.

Instead, they've cobbled together internationals against countries still willing to play them. Their first friendly came against Kyrgyzstan, seven months post-invasion.

They've since faced former Soviet states Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, plus Iran, Iraq, Qatar, Cameroon and Kenya. They thrashed Cuba 8-0 in Volgograd in November, then beat Serbia 4-0 in March. That was to be followed by a friendly with Paraguay, but it was cancelled because of that week's terrorist attack in Moscow.

In September, UEFA had voted to allow Russia to enter European Under-17 Championship qualifying, the finals taking place in Cyprus this summer, but aborted that plan after at least 12 countries said they would not agree to play them.

have qualified for the Euros, though – it helps to lift the national spirit during the war."

CARRYING THE FLAG

For those who left Ukraine because of the war, travelling to national team matches is easier. Many feel it their duty to support.

Artem Gesse is a Shakhtar fan who works for a UK recruitment agency and was offered the chance to move here after the war began. "We were at the game against Wales in the World Cup play-offs, and losing was a major disappointment," he says.

"Now we've qualified for the Euros, and the atmosphere against Iceland was magical. I took a flag that soldiers signed for me, and it was a message to our team. Their success is a ray of light during very dark times for our country. It's also a great platform to remind the world that we still exist. The war goes on, but we keep living our lives, despite our enemy's will."

Clockwise from below Soldiers keep track from the frontline; facing Germany; football is a vital release within war-torn cities; Ukraine fans get behind their side



Vadym Tsapok moved from Kyiv to Poland immediately after the February 2022 invasion, and misses the national team home games.

"I used to go to all the big games in Kyiv, including Euro 2012, and went to a couple of games in Lviv," he says. "The atmosphere was always warm and patriotic – singing the national anthem is always special. But since the war started, it's even more important.

"Now we support the nation as a whole, and we have to do that abroad. A lot of banners can be seen in support of our armed forces and prisoners of war. I went to the 'home' games against England in Wroclaw and against Italy in Leverkusen, and it was quite special. Inside the stadium you feel like home, but outside you're abroad already. The atmosphere is also a bit different – there are fewer men, and more women and kids."

Kateryna Smelyanskyy is one of those women. "Originally, I'm from Kherson, annexed by Russia, but now I live in Mainz," she says. "The atmosphere at national team matches is completely different compared with pre-war times. Every single win on the pitch now feels like the next step to win the war. Previously the Russian language was frequently spoken by Ukraine fans, but now you only hear Ukrainian. People support each other, and our bond is much stronger."

That bond includes previously less involved people from the wider Ukrainian diaspora. Mychaylo Jaworksyi is an Englishman, whose paternal grandparents lived in Ukraine.

"They passed away before I was born in 1995, so I never met them," he says. "The national team means the absolute world to me. I went to my first game in 2019 – we won 5-0 against Serbia, and I've always had a sense of belonging. After the full invasion started, things changed.

"As a British-Ukrainian, it's a privilege to be able to go and support our national team, to carry the flag for the soldiers on the frontline. I'm proud to do it – it humbles me every time. People are getting killed for being Ukrainian. I've always been proud of my heritage, but now it's got a new meaning.

"My first wartime game was in Scotland in the World Cup play-off semi-final in June 2022. It gave me goosebumps. I went with my father, and he told me that soldiers were watching the game from the frontline. These games are bigger than football. They give people back home a lift. They can't be here, but we'll be here for them.

"I travelled to all of the Euro 2024 qualifiers and met a lot Ukrainians from different countries, including the United States and Canada. They also felt it was their duty to support the nation. The national team now brings people from different parts of the world together, and that's very special. I've made a lot of new friends, and we meet each other at the matches. We're like one big family now. It's a great gift for me."

That Ukrainian family heads to Germany in June and will fill the stadiums and streets during Euro 2024. It will be impossible to find more patriotic and passionate fans.

Their expectations are high. The feeling is that the current squad might be better than the one that reached the Euro 2020 quarter-finals, where they lost 4-0 to England having beaten Sweden in the last 16. It could even be better than the team that reached the quarter-finals of the 2006 World Cup, Andriy Shevchenko, current gaffer Rebrov and all, in the last tournament hosted by Germany. That was Ukraine's major finals debut post-independence, when a vocal travelling support undoubtedly helped.

This summer, motivation, character and pure talent could yet take them further still – among the standout players are Arsenal's Oleksandr Zinchenko, Chelsea's improving Mykhailo Mudryk, Ruslan Malinovskyi of Genoa, Andriy Lunin of Real Madrid, Girona duo Viktor Tsyhankov and Artem Dovbyk, plus Valencia forward Roman Yaremchuk. The latter made headlines as a Benfica player in February 2022 when moved to tears following a standing ovation by the crowd, after his introduction a substitute in the first game since Russia's incursion.

"We have a young and gifted team, with stars playing in major leagues in England, Spain and Italy," concludes Smelyanskyy. "There's a strong belief in all of them, and we know the players do a lot for the country off the pitch as well."

Tsapok is no less confident. "Rebrov is an excellent coach," he says. "Then there's Lunin and Anatoliy Trubin in goal, Illya Zabarnyi in defence, Zinchenko, Tsyhankov, Dovbyk, Heorhiy Sudakov... they're all top players."

But none of them are bona fide superstars. Tsapok smiles. "Not yet," he winks. "Not yet."

HOW KOBBIE MAINOO COULD FIX ENGLAND'S OLDEST PROBLEM


SCAN HERE TO WATCH THE VIDEO

Playing his first two matches for the Three Lions in March, the 19-year-old midfielder highlighted how he could help the side retain possession better

Words Adam Clery

Hold your nose for the honking takes and browse social media during an England game. You'll see thousands – literally thousands – of identical posts about Gareth Southgate being "too negative", "holding the team back" and "always picking his favourites".

Yet England will go into a major tournament this summer as one of the bookmakers' favourites, alongside Didier Deschamps' France, with probably their most aggressive system in generations and a starting XI that doesn't seem finalised.

Possibly the main position that could dominate discourse between now and their opening game of Euro 2024 against Serbia in Gelsenkirchen on June 16 is central midfield.



Whether it's a 4-2-3-1 or a 4-3-3 (or both), England look set to have three bodies in the engine room when they take to the pitch.

With 50 caps and a fine first season at Arsenal under his belt, Declan Rice will be one. Having gone from strength to strength since heading to Real Madrid, Jude Bellingham will be another. But the identity of the third player remains a mystery.

A few months ago, the only candidates would have been the ageing Jordan Henderson, the floundering Kalvin Phillips and the unconvincing Conor Gallagher. The emergence of Manchester United's Kobbie Mainoo provides the team with another option, opens up a world of possibility for how they play and, whisper it, potentially fixes a problem that's seemingly haunted them forever.

01 WHAT HE OFFERS

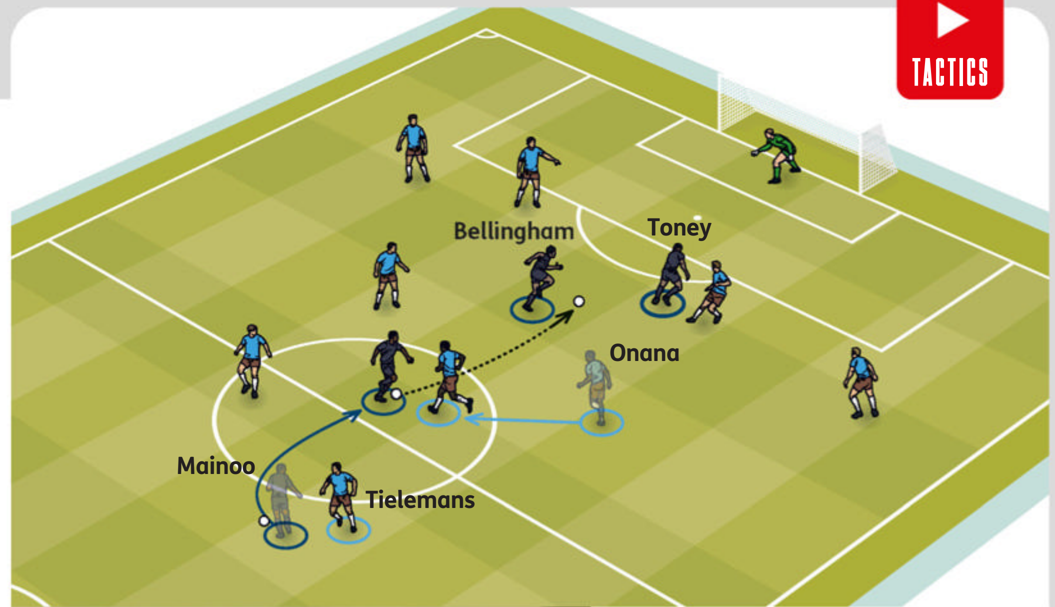
England have never had a player like Mainoo. However the 19-year-old's career (and his game) develops, he is a unique footballer in this crop of talent and adds something the side has been missing for literal decades.

He takes the ball under extreme pressure from opponents, then has the athleticism and the technique to decide how to move the ball up the pitch. Sometimes that's with short incisive passing that plays around the press; sometimes it can be by going on the proverbial 'maze-up', baffling the opposition and breaking through the press entirely.

Mainoo is a rare player who can do both. He is Michael Essien and Claude Makelele. He is both David Silva and Sergio Busquets. He is a monster truck that moves like a BMX.

One of the major criticisms of Southgate's reign focuses around England's total loss of control in the final of Euro 2020 – the team's visible anxiety over losing the ball in their own third led to them hopelessly playing long to relieve the pressure they were being put under by the Italians.

There wasn't a player that day who could reliably take the ball in those challenging circumstances. Mainoo is exactly that player.



02 THE PROBLEM THAT SOLVES

This should be obvious to anyone who's watched England in a tournament since... [checks notes] their literal founding 152 years ago. They never, ever, dominate the ball against the big sides.

Even in their 2-0 win over Germany at Euro 2020 – arguably their biggest result under Southgate – they had 46 per cent of the ball. Against Italy in the final, 35 per cent.

An England team with Mainoo becomes a frightening prospect in those games. Sit off him, and England will dominate possession in your half while Rice, Bellingham, Bukayo Saka etc probe off the ball for gaps in which to receive. Press Mainoo, and he'll wiggle through, opening up space of his own.

During England's March friendly against Belgium, it seemed like there was no danger when he received the ball centrally – Youri Tielemans felt confident getting tight to him, with Romelu Lukaku, Amadou Onana and Orel Mangala all situated within a few yards of him (illustrated right).

However, a couple of twists later, Mainoo spun away, drew two more players toward him in a panic, thus freeing up the space for Bellingham to receive a pass on the edge of the box. From that, England won a penalty.

03 THE PROBLEM IT DOESN'T SOLVE

During the two March friendlies, there was one consistent issue: the space between midfield and defence. England were on the front foot, but that openness led to them giving up more chances against Brazil than during the *entire* previous World Cup or Euros. If there was one criticism of Mainoo, it's that he was too easily caught on the wrong side of the ball.

There are three solutions available. The first is to play Rice as a more defensive No.6, but that would be a waste of his ability, and moving Mainoo up would also defeat the purpose of having a fine passer and carrier like the teenager in that pivotal position.

The second option is to have a high level of pace in the back four, allowing the defensive line to remain high. Unless England want to blood near enough an entirely new defence, though (minus Kyle Walker), they don't have the personnel to do that.

The solution will likely be option three: just live with it. It might be that, if Southgate sees his team as a high-pressing juggernaut with a suffocatingly high line to match, it may have to come at the cost of defensive solidity. If nothing else, it'll be entertaining.

HE IS BOTH DAVID SILVA AND SERGIO BUSQUETS – HE IS A MONSTER TRUCK THAT MOVES LIKE A BMX

JOHN McGINN IS THE EMBODIMENT OF A MUCH BOLDER, BRAVER SCOTLAND

Aston Villa's midfielder has made a significant impact for Steve Clarke's side – most crucially, during Scotland's comeback win over Norway

When the final whistle sounded at Hampden Park, Scotland having just been eliminated from Euro 2020 at the hands of Croatia, Steve Clarke will have known what had gone wrong. For all the scrutiny over tactics and systems, the one word he'll have been repeating in his head will have been 'bravery'.

After qualifying for a first major tournament in decades, his side mustered just one point and only scored a single goal. They had not looked overly outclassed against anyone, but equally hadn't had the courage in their play to ever really take them on.

That wasn't a total surprise. Qualification came via two play-off penalty shootouts, after netting just 16 goals in 10 qualifiers – only one more than Cyprus, with eight of their 16 coming against San Marino. Belgium scored 40 in the same group, Russia 33.

Today, this is a much braver Scotland side. At the heart of that is John McGinn – on and off the ball, determined to elevate this team way beyond their previous role of also-rans.

01 HOW SCOTLAND HAVE EVOLVED

While the lack of goals was the issue to address, a solid defensive foundation has become the trademark of Clarke's Scotland.

Recent results since qualifying for Euro 2024 haven't been overly encouraging, but prior to that they conceded just eight goals in eight qualifiers – five of those coming in dead rubbers against Georgia and Norway.

That record was as much in the concept as the execution, as Scotland play with an innovative pendulum system that sees them move from a defensive back five to an attacking back four – capable of making that change on both sides of the pitch.

The wing-backs, Aaron Hickey and Andy Robertson, play outside of centre-backs Ryan Porteous and Kieran Tierney. The former duo are comfortable pushing up as attacking wingers; the latter two can step in behind them as conventional full-backs.

That gives Scotland a perfectly balanced 3-4-2-1 out of possession, which becomes a 4-2-3-1 when the ball is won back.

It led to both of their goals in the victory over Spain, with their opponents unable to play either through or around their defensive shape and Robertson having a field day attacking the space in behind Pedro Porro.



02 McGINN'S IMPACT OFF THE BALL

In Scotland's preferred 3-4-2-1, John McGinn tends to start as one of the two midfielders behind the forward, regardless of whether that central forward is Lyndon Dykes, Che Adams or Lawrence Shankland. Alongside McGinn, Bournemouth's former Celtic man Ryan Christie often occupies the other spot behind the forward.

When defending, 29-year-old McGinn will look to lead the press on his side of the pitch, working in a triangle alongside the adjacent wing-back and central midfielder to pounce on any loose balls and then run directly into the space that's provided.

It's that aggression in winning the ball back which has really changed things for Scotland. McGinn's reading of the game and dexterity in the tackle means the 5ft 10in midfielder is seldom chasing shadows and destabilising the shape of those behind him.

Across the eight qualifying matches for Euro 2024, he ranked in the top five per cent of all midfielders for the number of tackles won in the centre of the pitch. It's a level of bite that Scotland were almost completely without last time around.



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03 McGINN'S IMPACT ON THE BALL

Unlike his position at Aston Villa, where he performs a horizontal role across the pitch, McGinn's job when representing the national side is more vertical.

Without a prolific goalscorer, Scotland live or die by the contribution of the midfielders, and McGinn was second behind only Scott McTominay for both the number of goals and total shots for the team in qualifying.

Late on during the crucial 2-1 away win against Norway, Clarke entrusted McGinn with becoming the team's main focal point, moving him centrally behind two forwards (illustrated above) – he brilliantly found the room to create two vital goals.

For the equaliser, he pushed up against a retreating defence before dropping off to receive the ball between the lines. By finding a space the hosts weren't covering, it caused confusion for Dykes to level.

For the winner, he broke into the penalty box to gamble on an overhit cross. Unmarked, he drew Kenny McLean's defender towards him before firing the ball into the six-yard area, allowing a simple lay-off for the goal.

McGinn had been trusted by Clarke to make a difference – that courage from the manager might get Scotland into the business end of this tournament.

McGINN WAS MADE THE FOCAL POINT IN NORWAY. HE FOUND THE ROOM TO CREATE TWO KEY GOALS

HOW GREECE BROKE THE EUROS IN 2004

It's 20 years since one of the greatest upsets in footballing history – Otto Rehhagel's side may not have been hugely innovative, but they sure were unbelievably effective

As likely evidenced by the fact you've just flicked to this page and audibly muttered, "Oh wow, yeah, Greece", the memory of triumph at Euro 2004 is likely lodged in a very weird part of your brain. It absolutely did happen, of that you're sure, but in the era before social media where every sporting happenstance wasn't being endlessly shared, clipped, memed and remixed, you can't recall it with any clarity.

All of the early noughties triumphs that involved major nations are clearly visible to you: Ronaldo's silly haircut running riot for Brazil against Germany in 2002, Zinedine Zidane's forehead attempting a living laryngoscopy on Marco Materazzi in 2006.

Not Greece. Angelos Charisteas' winning goal in the final seldom makes the highlight reels, and Theo Zagorakis is more likely to be mentioned as a pub quiz answer than during a conversation about football greats, despite captaining his country to Euros glory.

That's a tragedy – ironic, for the nation that birthed that very theatre genre. They also wrote maybe football's best underdog story.



01 THE PHILOSOPHY

The approach of boss Otto Rehhagel wasn't anything that was hugely ground-breaking. There wasn't an ingenious new setup, or even a generational star to build a unique tactic around.

What ingenuity the side did have centred around defender Traianos Dellas – Greece's system arranged themselves in such a way that he'd function as a centre-back without a specific man-marking job, allowing him to identify dangerous scenarios when out of possession (illustrated right) and also more freely join in with the midfielders when in it.

Greece did that by alternating between a back four and a back five, depending on the opposition. In the group against Spain, who had Fernando Morientes as a lone striker, Dellas was partnered by Michalis Kapsis, who stuck diligently to the forward.

In the quarter-final against France, who paired Thierry Henry and David Trezeguet, right-back Giourkas Seitaridis often moved into the centre – following Henry in from the flank – to share that responsibility.

Man-marking like that had all but vanished from top-level football several years prior, as the increased ability for attackers to rotate positions and find space exposed its obvious limitations. But by giving Dellas freedom to sweep behind, step forward and cover across when needed, opponents were flummoxed.





02 THE ARCHITECTURE

To suggest that Greece "weren't a passing side" would be a massively huge understatement. But, equally, to deride them as negative or passive would be doing them a disservice of equal heft.

Rehhagel was well aware of his team's limitations and had them organised in ways that masked their shortcomings on the ball. With no technically gifted midfielders or centre-backs entirely comfortable playing out, they'd routinely go long into central forward Zisis Vryzas or Charisteas out wide.

As the tournament progressed, they became increasingly efficient at convincing opponents they were looking to hold the ball up, coming slightly shorter and then flicking it into the space that opened up as a result. Stelios Giannakopoulos in particular became a potent weapon in that regard.

The one game where they really did try to keep the ball on the floor and play through their opponents was their final group game against Russia, which they lost 2-1. It cost themselves top spot in the group, ensuring they faced France rather than England in the last eight. They learned their lesson, though.



SCAN HERE TO WATCH MORE TACTICS VIDEOS

TO CLAIM THAT GREECE WEREN'T A PASSING SIDE WOULD BE A MASSIVELY HUGE UNDERSTATEMENT

03 THE THEATRE

In the knockout stages, Greece refined their method and went all the way to the trophy, thanks to three pretty much identical 1-0 victories.

They'd keep things as tight as possible in the opening half, almost never committing players forward to open up space for their opponents. As the match wore on, they'd work opportunities to cross the ball, then use their superior size and strength against tiring players to nick a goal. From there, the shop's doors, windows and shutters would quickly be closed again.

In the quarter-final against France, they kept Henry, Trezeguet, Zidane, Robert Pires and Louis Saha out, while Charisteas nodded in a cross just after the hour. Against the Czech Republic, Milan Baros, Jan Koller, Pavel Nedved and Tomas Rosicky attacked in vain, only for Dellas to head home an extra-time corner. Then in the final against Portugal, a near carbon-copy corner for Charisteas was enough to deny Cristiano Ronaldo, Luis Figo, Deco and Rui Costa.

Were they fortunate? Maybe. But a fluke? Absolutely not. Rehhagel made every star in the footballing cosmos align – that should be celebrated, not forgotten.

AROUND THE GROUNDS

EFL • NON-LEAGUE • SCOTLAND



INTERVIEW

CALLUM STYLES

On loan at Sunderland from Barnsley since January, the midfielder can't wait to turn out for Hungary at Euro 2024

Interview Chris Flanagan

How much have you enjoyed playing for Hungary since your 2022 debut?
As a kid, I wanted to play international football and I've bagged 20 caps now – I never would have dreamed of that. I've got to keep going but, at the same time, you need to take a step back and think, 'Wow, I'm living the dream'. There's part of me that's a bit nervous about the Euros, because it's a massive stage, but you just have to enjoy it. You'll look back on it when you retire as an experience you'll never forget.

You were born and raised in Greater Manchester. How did you find out about your connection to Hungary?
My mum's mum was born there – her side of the family is all Hungarian. We knew our grandparents weren't from England, but I never really had a chat with my mum until I was older, when she told us a little bit more. Then when I was at Barnsley, I did an interview for a matchday programme, mentioned it and it caught fire. Someone got hold of the story and then the Hungarian team made contact with me.

What happened next?
Everything happened so fast – I didn't expect them to be so eager, but it was a good feeling. I needed to sort out a passport but the coach [Marco Rossi] rang me in November 2021 and told me, "I want you to come to the games in March." I remember replying, "What, do you mean just to watch?" He said, "No... to play!" I was like, "Oh, right..." [*Laughs*] That was when I made my debut [against Serbia]. Since then, time has flown by. It's been incredible.

Your debut was also the first time you'd ever visited Hungary, right?
Back in 2020, me and my missus had planned to visit Budapest, but then COVID hit. Two years later, I ended up making my debut on my first visit. It felt surreal – I was 21 and thought I'd be called up for the under-21s, but the coach said, "No, no, I want you in my team." The stadium was unbelievable, it holds 60,000, and even for friendlies they sell out every game – the fans are some of the best I've come across. The city was beautiful as well. My girlfriend and my family travelled to watch the game, and afterwards we explored and went on a boat trip. It was just superb.

What was it like going into the squad without speaking the language?
It was quite daunting at first, but the lads and staff were really welcoming.

> "I EXPECTED TO BE IN HUNGARY'S U21s, BUT THE COACH SAID, 'NO, YOU'RE IN MY TEAM'"

I don't speak fluent Hungarian, but everyone in the world seems to speak English! The coach is Italian, so all of the meetings are in English and it was a lot easier than I thought to settle in.

Three months after your debut, you played against England twice in 10 days, winning 1-0 in Budapest, then 4-0 in Wolverhampton...
Crazy. I came on in the first game, then started the second. England are really strong and to beat them twice, in my first year, was unbelievable. Friends were messaging me saying, "Oh my God, I can't believe you just beat us!"

You helped Hungary to top their Euro 2024 qualifying group – was a major tournament the dream?
Definitely, 100 per cent. As a national team, we've improved so much over the past couple of years. We had an excellent Nations League campaign, which meant we secured a favourable seeding for the qualifiers, and we've gone 14 games unbeaten. I can't wait for the tournament – it's exciting and we want to progress as far as we can. We're getting stronger and stronger, so the pressure's mounting. We can't simply be happy to be there – to get through the group stage is kind of a must because there's pressure from

the whole nation. We'll put that on ourselves, too – we're good enough.

At 16, you had an unusual club debut. Bury had points deducted because they forgot to register you properly *and* you became the first player born post-2000 to play in the EFL...
People often say it's a decent pub quiz question! [*Laughs*] Playing for Bury at a young age was a brilliant experience that's benefited me a lot. Bury were a top club and it was sad to see what happened after I left, as they helped me get to where I am now. I'll always be grateful for that.

You helped Barnsley to finish fifth and reach the Championship play-offs in 2021, then joined Millwall on loan after the Tykes' relegation. Did you feel you needed to stay in the second tier for your Hungary career?
Yeah, that was on my mind. To nearly get promoted to the Premier League with Barnsley gave me confidence – we overachieved that season and did really well. When I moved to Millwall, it was important to keep the club in the Championship and carry on getting international call-ups.

You spent the first half of this term back at Barnsley in League One. Did you appreciate Hungary boss Marco Rossi continuing to select you?
Yeah, we had a conversation and he said, "As a player, you don't change, it's just your situation that has changed." He really likes me as a player but said, "You need to get back to playing at a higher level." Had I stayed at Barnsley all season, I don't know if he would have picked me for March or the Euros. I want to play at the highest level anyway – I feel like I should be playing in the Championship or possibly higher, so going to Sunderland in January was giving something back to him.

How has your Sunderland loan gone?
We've gone through two managers this season so it's been a rocky road, but after nine or 10 matches I started to enjoy my time and the supporters are so passionate. It's a top club.

You have a year left on your Barnsley contract – what's next?
I haven't really thought about it, as I've been focusing on playing. Sunderland have Premier League ambitions so I'd love to stay longer, but there are lots of factors that could result in different scenarios. We'll see.

You'll be in a pretty high-profile shop window this summer...
[*Laughs*] Yeah. I just want to play some minutes at the Euros. The main aim is to get out of the group, as that's when the real games start to happen.

NON-LEAGUE NEWS

'ARE YOU EVEN TRYING TO SAVE THESE?'

Maidstone United goalkeeper Lucas Colovan isn't fazed by non-league free-kick takers – he used to help set-piece deity Juninho Pernambucano perfect his art

Juninho Pernambucano has gone down in history as a dead-ball doyen after converting more free-kicks (77) than anyone else on the planet, but a goalkeeper currently starring in English football's sixth tier had a hand in helping him to master his technique.

Maidstone United shot-stopper Lucas Covolan (below) was just a youngster rising through the ranks at Vasco da Gama when the Brazil international – keen to practise set pieces after training sessions – would ask him to stand between the sticks.

Desperate to make an impression during the early stages of his career, the 6ft 4in custodian faced countless Juninho specials, but getting near any of them proved almost impossible. Understandably so.

"Juninho would frequently ask me to go in goal because the first and second-choice goalkeepers didn't want to get involved with his free-kicks, and I quickly found out why," Covolan recalls to *FFT*.

"There would always be several mannequins as a wall and he'd ask if I could see the ball. I'd say yes, but it didn't really matter because every single attempt would go into the top corner. All of my team-mates would laugh at me and think I wasn't even trying, but it would have been the same result whether I was there or it was a cone in goal.

"No one could replicate Juninho's technique or how he took free-kicks. I see him as one of the best free-kick takers ever, so being involved in those sessions was a great experience at such a young age.

"It has given me more confidence coming face-to-face with free-kicks, because I know whoever is taking them can't be as good as Juninho!"

> "JUNINHO HIT THE TOP CORNER EVERY TIME. IT WOULD BE THE SAME WITH A CONE IN GOAL"

Not even Weymouth's goal machine Brandon Goodship, we'd venture.

Covolan was also in the same Vasco youth system as Philippe Coutinho, who cost Barcelona £146m when he joined from Liverpool in 2018, and enjoyed time alongside ex-Chelsea magician Oscar while in the Brazil Under-20 setup.

Oscar has gone on to pocket close to £150m in wages since swapping Stamford Bridge for the vast riches on offer in China – a far-cry from Covolan's pay package at Maidstone – and the former Blue was already making a statement as a teenager.

"I played with and against Oscar, although playing against him wasn't a good thing," concedes Covolan.

"I was in a Brazil U20 squad with him – I remember all of us boarding a flight to Montevideo for a training camp in Uruguay, but he couldn't make the first day.

"He joined us on the second day, when a helicopter landed where we were training. He was already a big name in Brazil and that moment is something I'll never forget."

Covolan went on to appear for Rio Branco in Brazil and Spanish outfit Alaro prior to rocking up in English football's lower leagues, initially at Whitehawk, in 2016. After spells at Worthing and Torquay, he guided Port Vale to promotion to League One in 2022 before signing for Maidstone last summer. The 32-year-old played a crucial role in the Stones becoming the first team from outside the top five tiers to reach the FA Cup fifth round in 46 years, only for Coventry to end the dream run in a 5-0 defeat.

Still, who else in National League South can say they helped a Brazilian icon to set a world record?

Danny Rust






BEST & WORST




BARNET

Lifelong Bee **Charlie Cassen** reminisces about Oasis bangers, Barry Fry magic and Edgar Davids' dreadlocks...

XI

BEST: Lee Harrison, Andy Yiadom, Ricardo Santos, Simon King, Kenny Gillett, Albert Adomah, Nicky Bailey, Luisma Villa, Jason Puncheon, John Akinde, Guiliano Grazioli.

WORST: Warning – most of these are from Peter Beadle's 2020-21 squad: Ran Kadoch, Myles Judd, Bilel Mohsni, Ben Nugent, Sam Muggleton, Kieron St Aimie, Tyrone Duffus, Fuad Sule, Shaun Batt, Charlie Taylor, Alfie Pavey.

PLAYER

B: For what they did in their careers, the two most iconic have to be Jimmy Greaves [inset] and Edgar Davids, but the best player I've seen wear the shirt is Jason Puncheon [right]. That man was magic.

W: In 36 games for us, Charlie Taylor managed more red cards than goals, including a ban for spitting in someone's face. Woeful.





MOMENT

B: Dean Sinclair's consolation goal at Old Trafford in a 2005 League Cup third round defeat.

W: Losing the 2022-23 FA Trophy semi-final on penalties to Gateshead hurt a lot. We've had to wait since the 1970s to visit Wembley.

GAME

B: In the FA Cup third round in 2019, we knocked out Sheffield United at Bramall Lane when they were top of the Championship. It was an incredible day – the start of Darren Currie bringing a feelgood factor back to the club.

W: Getting relegated at Northampton in 2012-13. Sickening.

SEASON

B: 2014-15 – winning the Conference for a third time under Martin Allen.

W: The 2020-21 COVID season under Beadle was the most depressing year of my life. I have PTSD from watching the National League TV stream.

SIGNING

B: We got Big John Akinde from Alfreton in 2014 and his goals took us back into the EFL. I love that man.

W: Collins John was truly shocking. He had to be taken off 15 minutes into his debut.

HARD MAN

B: "We got Ian Hendon, he don't come from Swindon, he's from Ilford, he's very good". Hendo would have died for us. Our captain. Our number four.

W: I'll have to pick Edgar Davids, as he was just a big crybaby, really. He was sent off at Salisbury and I think that's when he eventually realised his career had reached a new low.

CULT HERO

B: Clovis Kamdjo [left]: not the world's best footballer, but a Barnet hero. Clovis, if you're reading this, I love you.

W: I could fill this magazine with words about how awful Ben Nugent was, on and off the pitch.



MANAGER

B: It was a touch before my time, but I'd have to say Barry Fry [left]. He took us to the EFL in 1991 and then into the old Division Two a couple of years later, which is the highest we've ever been.

W: Two words: Peter Beadle.

HAIRCUT

B: It'd be rude not to give this to Davids and his legendary dreads.

W: Scott Tynan had some dodgy hairstyles for a few seasons – have a butcher's online.

CHANT

B: One of my favourites, to the tune of *Hello* by Oasis, is, "Hello, Helloooo, it's good to be Bees, it's good to be Bees".

W: "Shoes off if you love the Bees", hands down.

OPPONENT

B: Notts County were amazing under Luke Williams in 2022-23. They would have won the National League easily had it not been for Wrexham and their Hollywood FC money.

W: Boreham Wood, also called Boring Wood for good reason. I wouldn't wish being a Boreham Wood supporter on my worst enemy.

AWAY DAY

B: On May 5, 2012, we had to win at Burton to stay up and send Hereford down. We won 2-1 with a goal from Mark Hughes in front of the away end. A small part of one of my front teeth is chipped from the wild celebrations.

W: Every single trip to Rochdale.

EFL PLAY-OFFS

PLAY-OFF PANDEMONIUM

The EFL play-offs provide unparalleled drama on and off the field – these are some of our favourite moments

SWINDON'S PROMOTION-RELEGATION
SECOND DIVISION, MAY/JUNE 1990

Many sides get relegated following promotion, but none quicker than Ossie Ardiles' Swindon in 1989-90. After sealing top-flight football with a 1-0 Wembley victory over Sunderland, the Robins were instead relegated down to the third tier, having admitted to making illegal payments to players and staff in the preceding years. Chairman Brian Hillier was jailed but Swindon were ultimately reinstated to the second tier on appeal, before Ardiles' successor, Glenn Hoddle, led them to the promised land in 1993. What a ride.

KERMORGANT'S CURSE
CHAMPIONSHIP, MAY 2010

Panenkas: great when they come off, humiliating when they don't. Yann Kermorgant knows that better than most. Taking Leicester's fourth penalty in the semi-final shootout against Cardiff, the Frenchman opted not to put his laces through it but to gently lift the ball into the arms of a grateful David Marshall. Cardiff won and Kermorgant never chipped a ball for the Foxes ever again, though on the plus (?) side, his penalty birthed a YouTube hit to the tune of *Total Eclipse of the Heart* that still accompanies the striker's name on any Google search. Altogether now: "What else can I say? He was totally s**t from the start…"

"DEEEEEEEENEY!"
CHAMPIONSHIP, MAY 2013

Leicester again. Sorry, lads. Just 18 stoppage-time seconds separated Watford's Manuel Almunia saving Anthony Knockaert's penalty (and its rebound) and Troy Deeney smashing home at the other end to seal a Wembley final. Watford would then lose it to Crystal Palace in one of history's worst matches, but they'll always have those 18 seconds. Oddly, Doncaster had won League One in near-identical circumstances two weeks earlier when Brentford fluffed a penalty that would have taken them up in Donny's place. Instead, they lost in the play-off final. Still, it's all fun, isn't it?

POO-DUNNIT?
CHAMPIONSHIP, MAY 2013

Brighton and Palace have a long-standing feud, but s**t really hit the fan when the pair met the day after Deeney's winner in the other semi-final. The Eagles arrived at the Amex with the tie poised at 1-1, only to find excrement smeared across their changing room ("It was all over the floor, brown swirls – and the smell…" recalled striker Aaron Wilbraham, gagging). A fired-up Palace won 2-0 with a Wilfried Zaha brace, before beating Watford in the aforementioned crime against football. Investigations were launched to find the poo-petrator, but it was only years later that he was unmasked as… Palace's own bus driver? Zoinks!

MILLWALL INVADE WEMBLEY
LEAGUE ONE, MAY 2017

Storming the field has become standard for EFL fans following semi-final wins, but Wembley is different. Since it re-opened in 2007, only one team's support has succeeded. You guessed it: Millwall. The Lions invaded after a 1-0 win over Bradford in the League One final, goading the opposition bench and leading match-winner Steve Morison to sulk, "It should be our faces in the papers tomorrow, not theirs". Awks.



DERBY'S SPYGATE REVENGE
CHAMPIONSHIP, MAY 2019

When Leeds were caught spying on a Derby training session in January 2019, Marcelo Bielsa accepted the £200,000 fine… and delivered an hour-long public presentation on Frank Lampard's tactics. Cold. When the pair met again in the play-offs, Lampard claimed he "hadn't thought about it in months", but clearly his players had: goals in their 4-2 away victory were celebrated with binocular gestures, and Derby loanee Mason Mount later tweeted, "I spy with my little eye, something beginning with W". Revenge is sweet.

BACK WITH A BANG
LEAGUE ONE, JULY 2020

Football's return after the COVID hiatus was always set to be special, but the semi-final first leg between Fleetwood and Wycombe was weird. Three goals in the first six minutes, two red cards, a saved penalty, two more goals and a flare thrown onto the pitch from outside the ground (the game was behind closed doors) led to a wild 4-1 win for Wycombe at Joey Barton's Cod Army. The Chairboys only made the play-offs on points per game – they were eighth when football stopped – but toppled Oxford in the final.

THE PLAY-OFFS' GREATEST COMEBACK
LEAGUE ONE, MAY 2023

Sheffield Wednesday's promotion hopes looked dead and buried after a 4-0 loss at Peterborough in the first leg of their semi-final, but a raucous Hillsborough contributed to an incredible fightback. The Owls led 2-0 within 25 minutes and 3-0 midway through the second half, but it took them until the 98th minute to force extra time… whereupon Wednesday scored an own goal. Typical. Another de facto equaliser brought penalties, which they won before beating Barnsley in the final with a 123rd-minute strike. Easy as you like.

Ed McCambridge



ALMUNIA SAVED THE PENALTY; 18 SECONDS LATER, DEENEY SENT WATFORD TO WEMBLEY

CLUB VS COUNTRY

US AGAINST THE WORLD

A gaggle of EFL, non-league and Scottish teams have taken on international opponents down the years, with unimpressive Wonders of the World, kung-fu fighting and Elton John shopping sprees among the many hijinks

EXETER WERE INVITED BACK 100 YEARS LATER, DESPITE SOME ROUGHHOUSE TACTICS IN THE ORIGINAL FIXTURE

BRAZIL 2-0 EXETER 1914

"Have you ever played Brazil?" goes a popular song on the terraces of St James Park, referencing July 1914's clash. Exeter City, then of the Southern League Division One, ended an 11-match South American tour against an XI put together by the newly formed Brazilian Sports Federation, the tussle later billed as the Selecao's first fixture. It didn't go well. A number of Grecians were arrested for indecent exposure after swimming in just their shorts, then Brazil, dressed in all white, sambaed to a 2-0 victory despite some roughhouse visitor tactics. Still invited back 100 years later, Exeter faced Fluminense in the same stadium (above) – thankfully, a convivial 0-0 stalemate. Phew.

MARINE 2-5 NIGERIA 1949

Eleven years before independence from the British, Nigeria set sail on a two-week voyage to Liverpool for a football tour of their colonial oppressors. Fresh off the boat, they faced Marine at Rossett Park, Crosby. Barefoot, as per, the Super Eagles won 5-2 in front of 6,000 fans, still a Mariners record. "Their feet were harder than our boots," Marine's captain later joked. Forced to wear proper footwear in their next game, Nigeria lost 8-0 to an Athenian League XI. Spoilsports.

GRIMSBY 7-2 JAPAN 1971

The land of the rising sun didn't have a nationwide league until the 1960s and to boost their football development embarked on a European tour in 1971, taking on Iceland, Italy and, er, Grimsby. Watched by 3,000 spectators at Blundell Park, Lawrie McMenemy's Mariners handed their guests a 7-2 tanning, as Mike Hickman bagged a hat-trick. Both Japan strikes came from Kunishige Kamamoto, who, with 75 goals in 76 caps, remains Japan's all-time leading goalscorer.



WEST BROM TO CHINA 1978

When England failed to qualify for the 1978 World Cup, West Brom took the Three Lions' place on the 'warm-up' tour of China. Following a 90-hour jaunt, Cyrille Regis inspired the Baggies to wins over Beijing, Hong Kong and China in packed, silent stadia (right, middle). "It was impolite for fans to shout," defender Brendon Batson recalled. "You could hear a pin drop." The excursion included visits to see a trumpet-playing panda, Chairman Mao's mausoleum and the Great Wall of China. "Once you've seen one wall, you've seen 'em all" said midfielder John Trewick. Fair point.

WATFORD TO CHINA 1983

Top-tier runners-up Watford followed the Baggies to the Far East for their own trek five years later. With 80,000 people present and 350 million more watching on television, Graham Taylor's Hornets defeated China 3-1 in their opening match, then downed Shanghai. Tour highlights included a shopping spree in which owner Elton John (right, with the squad at the Great Wall) spent "40 times the local per capita income", according to journalist Martin Amis, covering the trip for *The Observer*, as well as visits to the Ming Tombs, the opera and the Forbidden City. Sounds delightful.



AYLESBURY 0-7 ENGLAND 1988

On the way home from a friendly in Turkey, reporter Frank McGhee suggested to Three Lions gaffer Bobby Robson that England face his local club, Aylesbury United. For some reason, Robson agreed. Just before Euro 88, a packed house watched the Conference outfit take on a full-strength England, featuring Gary Lineker, Bryan Robson and Glenn Hoddle. Naturally, England destroyed their lowly foes. "Chris Waddle was just massive and so fast," panted Ducks striker Cliff Hercules, despite his best efforts. "We couldn't get near him." After the amateur spanking, England crashed out of Euro 88 with three straight defeats.

KILMARNOCK TO SOUTH KOREA 1995

A grand total of six Killie fans made the 5,000-mile-plus expedition to Seoul for a week-long pre-season tournament against the national sides of South Korea, Ecuador, Zambia and Costa Rica, clubs Mechelen and Trelleborg, plus a Rio XI from Brazil. After a 2-2 draw with Costa Rica that saw Neil Whitworth's nose broken early doors, the Scots lost 2-1 to 'Brazil' and then 5-1 to the hosts to exit after the group stage. "We were trying to train in 40C heat and the food was horrific," huffed striker Mark Roberts. Those in glass houses...

BAMBER BRIDGE 1-9 CZECH REPUBLIC 1996

All-round Bamber Bridge good egg Russ Rigby had just finished mowing the Irongate pitch when the office phone rang; a nearby Preston hotel wanted to know if the sixth-tier Brig would be up for hosting a friendly against their newly arrived guests, the Czech Republic. An incredulous Rigby couldn't agree quickly enough. A sell-out crowd of 2,300 watched a team with 422 international caps between them dismantle their local minnows. Goals from dreamboat Patrik Berger, Karel Poborsky and future Ballon d'Or winner Pavel Nedved contributed to a 9-1 win just a month before the Czechs lost the Euro 96 Final against Germany.

CELTIC 0-1 IRELAND 2005

A May testimonial for departing Bhoys skipper Jackie McNamara also served as joint farewells to outgoing midfielder Paul Lambert, to become Livingston boss, and gaffer Martin O'Neill, who was heading south for Aston Villa after claiming seven trophies in five years at Celtic Park. Given the Hoops had won the Scottish Cup less than 24 hours earlier, and the feelgood factor of the occasion, the intensity may have been lacking somewhat as Tottenham goal-getter Robbie Keane sealed a late win for an Irish side featuring Roy Keane, Damien Duff, Niall Quinn and Steven Reid (above).

THAILAND 0-1 BOLTON 2005

Sam Allardyce loved grinding out 1-0 wins during his Wanderers pomp, regardless of the opposition. It was by this scoreline that the Trotters defeated a Thailand team mostly made up of under-23 tyros ahead of the





2005-06 campaign. Despite such international stars as Jay-Jay Okocha, Ivan Campo and El Hadji Diouf, who netted a decisive penalty, Bolton needed some excellent goalkeeping from Jussi Jaaskelainen to lift the Premier League Asia Trophy – a tournament Manchester City and Everton had also taken part in.

QPR A-A CHINA 2007

What's the opposite of a 'friendly'? This. The Chinese Olympic team's tour of England took a turn for the worse when they played QPR at the latter's training ground. After numerous tasty challenges had referee Dermot Gallagher reaching for his notebook, China striker Gao Lin opted to go a step further, slapping an opponent and sparking a 30-man brawl. "There were punches, kung-fu kicks and all sorts," an eye-witness told reporters. "It was absolute mayhem." The match was abandoned after China defender Zheng Tao went to hospital with a broken jaw. Same again next year?

HEATON STANNINGTON 0-4 GABON 2012

Marking Pierre-Emerick Aubameyang is hard enough, let alone straight after a 10k. That's what non-league centre-back Joe Wear was tasked with when a last-minute friendly was arranged against Gabon in the lead-up to the 2012 Olympics. Wear was preparing for the Great North Run when he was informed his Heaton Stannington had replaced Newcastle United U21s as the Panthers' warm-up opponents... later the same day. Future Borussia Dortmund and Arsenal talisman Auba made light work of his jaded marker, scoring twice and assisting twice before the break. "The pace on him was absolutely electric," said Wear.

YEOVIL 0-1 LATVIA 2013

A game so dull, a local news outlet gave their man-of-the-match award in this perplexing mid-season friendly to Yeovil's commercial manager Dave Linney, for his impressive pronunciations of the Latvia line-up over the PA system before kick-off. Even Glovers boss Gary Johnson conceded afterwards that Linney "did alright" in possibly the least enthusiastic appraisal ever. Johnson, presumably, was behind the match as Latvia manager from 1999 to 2001. During that time, he recommended Marians Pahars to Southampton (good) and Igors Stepanovs to Arsenal (not as good).

MARLOW 2-3 KUWAIT 2019

Ranked 156th in the world, Kuwait rocked up in England for a training camp ahead of the West Asian Championship in Iraq. Taking on Marlow, Hungerford and Maidenhead prior to the new league campaign, the 1982 World Cup participants won all three games – though the former came the closest to an upset. "Maybe Marlow will be able to enter the next World Cup," tittered club chairman Terry Staines. The Gulf nation even presented the 1882 FA Cup semi-finalists with a commemorative plaque as a thank you. Aww.
Ed McCambridge

THE PLAYERS LOUNGE

DARIUS VASSELL
EIDUR GUDJOHNSEN
KHALID BOULAHROUZ



TEAMS
Aston Villa
Manchester City
Ankaragucu
Leicester
England

DARIUS VASSELL

"IT'S NEVER OK TO MISS A PENALTY AT A TOURNAMENT, BUT SOMEONE HAS TO. IT DOESN'T HAUNT ME"

The tireless ex-forward on mixing it with Becks & Co at Euro 2004, as well as his love for Sven and Manchester derby wins

Interview Sean Cole

How did it feel to break into the first team at Aston Villa, your boyhood club, in 1998?
It meant the world to me. Now, I probably enjoy that achievement more than anything. At the time, because it's so intense and you have such an important job, you find yourself caught up in the moment. You have to be professional and focus on the task at hand. No one thought it would happen, possibly, but I managed to make a career out of it.

Why did you and Juan Pablo Angel form such a good strike partnership?
Juan brought flair and ingenuity to the team. He could score goals you don't see coming. His ability in the air was phenomenal, too. I was very instinctive – I wanted the chance to latch onto things and use my pace, which made the game a little bit easier for him. We enjoyed trying to make opportunities out of nothing. He brought qualities to the table that I felt I was lacking and wanted to be better at. He certainly made me think about those sides of the game.

Was it hard to leave the club you support?
It was difficult. I was in the last year of my contract and in discussions about a new one. I had no intention of leaving. I didn't care that the gaffer, David O'Leary, had agreed to sell me – I felt like the club was more mine than his. I was a Birmingham lad and knew he wasn't going to be at Villa forever. But you gear yourself towards the club that wants you, and it was better to be wanted by Manchester City than on Villa's fringes. It turned out to be the best thing for me, as I witnessed the start of their turnaround.

You scored in a couple of famous derby wins for Manchester City. Which of those was your favourite?
The Old Trafford one is more memorable. We both wore special kits for that game, which added an historic feel to the match. I have a picture of that goal on a wall in my house, actually. To beat Manchester United at their place is a massive feat, so that'd probably edge the other one, but it was always exciting to face them. Being underdogs motivated us because the expectations were low and the rewards were really high.

You were still at Manchester City when the current owners arrived. What did you think when that takeover happened?
You're torn, because you're happy for the club but disappointed that there's a big chance you won't be part of the journey. It was hard to come to terms with that. There were so many of us in that situation. Deep down, we all understood it and were happy that City were going to be in a better place. You forge relationships at the club that continue to this day – you want the very best for them and have to let them grow.

What prompted your surprise move to Ankaragucu in 2009?
My contract had run out at City and I was told that I could leave. The opportunity I was given in Turkey was the best one, not only financially but in terms of having a fresh start and making a name for myself. The football was very frantic. My ability was certainly tested and I realised how key it was to communicate with your team-mates on the pitch – I had to learn the buzzwords they use in Turkey. The supporters would turn up for training and cheer you as if it was a game! They'd bring fireworks to matches and rally around your coach when it arrived at the stadium. Also, a lot of the players smoked, which I wasn't used to. I adapted quickly to the cultural things, but the club's organisation was a problem. It was normal for players to not be paid or have a training pitch – things you take for granted in England.

What did Sven-Goran Eriksson like about you as a player, to pick you regularly for England, Manchester City and Leicester?
I think it was that reliability. I was willing to share in the out-of-possession work and be a threat, too. He told me to keep doing that and not over-complicate things – just play my natural game. He would tell you when you weren't hitting those targets, but he was a gentleman and would let you know in good time if you were going to be out of the team, while putting you in when you deserved it. The players respected him for that fairness.

What do your recall of scoring on your England debut, against the Netherlands in 2002, in the first of your 22 caps?
It was incredible and that goal topped it off. I didn't want that to be my only appearance – I knew England were experimenting, but I didn't want to appear once and be known as that person who had one cap. I wanted to establish myself in the team.

What was David Beckham like, both as a team-mate and captain?
David was a positive role model. Captaining England was a huge task, and it was a bit different for him because he also had this superstardom off the pitch that we weren't used to. He took that on really well. From a football point of view, I always knew that when he had the ball, I could receive it in an area where I'd have an impact. If I made a run, he'd never turn down the pass.

England lost to Portugal on penalties in the quarter-finals of Euro 2004. How did you deal with seeing your effort saved?
It was up to us to make sure the game didn't go to penalties. It's never OK to miss, but it has to be the final outcome for somebody. Unfortunately, on that occasion, it was me. I was able to move past that heartbreak. I was supported by the team and everything in place at the FA at the time. It isn't something that haunts me, but as a coach now, helping the younger players to deal with those moments, I think I could have been better prepared as a penalty taker.





EIDUR GUDJOHNSEN

"EURO 2016 WAS ICELAND'S GREATEST SUMMER! BEATING ENGLAND FROM BEHIND WAS A STATEMENT – WE EARNED THE RESPECT OF THE WORLD"

The ex-Chelsea and Barça man recalls toppling the Three Lions and explains the differences between Pep and Jose

Interview Lewis Watson

How much did you know about Bolton Wanderers ahead of your deal in 1998?
Not much. I moved to PSV when I was 16, and during my first full season with the first team I broke my ankle and was injured for the rest of my contract. Afterwards I was at KR in Reykjavik for a couple of months. But at that time, Bolton had two Icelandic players who I knew well, Arnar Gunnlaugsson and Gudni Bergsson, and they convinced the club to buy me. Phil Brown – assistant to Colin Todd, the manager at Bolton – called to invite me for a trial, and after the second session they confirmed that they wanted to sign me.

Did you feel pressure in moving to Chelsea after just two seasons at Bolton?
It was a huge move. They had just won the European Cup Winners' Cup and had World Cup winners in the squad, like Marcel Desailly and Frank Leboeuf. At training, everywhere you looked there was elite talent like Gustavo Poyet or Gianfranco Zola. But I felt ready for the move, so that reduced the pressure. Plus, how can you say no to Gianluca Vialli? He told me that he thought I was more than ready, which gave me bags of confidence, coming from a legend like him.



TEAMS
Valur
PSV
KR
Bolton
Chelsea
Barcelona
Monaco
Tottenham (loan)
Stoke
Fulham (loan)
AEK Athens
Cercle Brugge
Club Brugge
Shijiazhuang Ever Bright
Molde
Pune City
Iceland

You joined Chelsea in the same window as Jimmy Floyd Hasselbaink. What was it like meeting him?
We met in the lift at the Harlington training ground and it was love at first sight [*Laughs*]. It was quite romantic! There was an instant connection. I could speak fluent Dutch, which helped, and we did everything together, from sorting out our accommodation, to cars, to learning our way around London. It was a big help while adapting to a new life. Ray Wilkins and the whole coaching team were brilliant in helping me to settle, too.

Who would you rank as the very best strike partner you've played alongside?
For me personally, it would be Jimmy as we had such an understanding. But, individually, it would have to be Brazilian Ronaldo. He was at a different level. I'll never forget playing with him at PSV in the 1994-95 season. He was thinking way, way ahead of everybody else and it made me realise that I had a lot to learn as a youngster to make it to the very top. Technically, physically and mentally, he had it all. He was probably the best No.9 ever.

Was your bicycle kick for Chelsea against Leeds in 2003 the best goal you scored?
It's the one that gave me the biggest natural high. You dream of these things as a kid and practise it thousands of times in the garden or in training; to do it in the Premier League against a big rival like Leeds was very special indeed. I remember Zola telling me after the match, "Eidur, you showed me something special today". That meant the world to me.

Describe the Stamford Bridge atmosphere during Chelsea's famous 4-2 win against Barcelona in 2005?
Didier Drogba was suspended for that game and Jose Mourinho had decided to go with Mateja Kezman up front, so I dropped into midfield. We trusted the process and within 20 minutes we were 3-0 up against the best team in Europe and thinking, 'What on Earth is happening here?' Ronaldinho then worked some magic and got Barcelona back into the game, so we had to score. John Terry popped up with a header and the place erupted. After that victory, we felt we could beat anybody. I was exhausted – I'd never run so much in my life. We'd worked on winning the ball and counter-attacking all week, and it worked so well. They were caught cold.

What's it like walking out at the Camp Nou for the first time as a Barcelona player?
I felt the players' respect straight away, as I'd faced them all a number of times and they knew what I could do. And I thought I knew pressure, due to my previous two seasons winning trophies with Chelsea, but you don't know what pressure is until you walk out at that stadium as a Barcelona player. It isn't enough to win – you have to look good doing it. It was the first time in my career that I had a bit of stage fright, going out there. For me, it's the Mecca of football.

Was it obvious to you and the rest of the squad that Lionel Messi would become the player that he did?
Yes. He'd already shown it the season before I arrived. He strolled into the team. It came natural to him. My last season at Barcelona, where we won everything on offer, was Leo confirming that he was the man.

What are some of the biggest differences between Mourinho and Pep Guardiola?
Coaching style? Not too much. Personalities? Totally different. Jose had that arrogance and was willing to be outspoken and fight for his team. He would get involved in some of the dark arts and obsess over details away from the pitch. Pep was more obsessed with pure football, whereas Jose was purely results-based. Jose would park the bus after taking a slender lead in a game, whereas Pep would demand a fourth, fifth or even sixth goal.



What was more satisfying for you: winning the Premier League for the first time with Chelsea or winning the treble with Barça?
Winning the Premier League with Chelsea, as I played such a big part in that season. I think only Frank Lampard played in more games than me in 2004-05 and I got a real feeling of having earned that medal. I was more of a squad player at Barcelona in the treble year; they probably would have done it without me, but perhaps Chelsea wouldn't have been able to win that season had I not fulfilled my role. To be honest, the greatest satisfaction from my time at Barcelona is in playing more than 100 times for one of the best teams in the world. Sometimes, Andres Iniesta and Ronaldinho were on the bench and I started. That makes me really proud.

Were you nervous about making moves to Fulham and Tottenham, considering your relationship with the Chelsea supporters?
Fulham, not really, but Tottenham? Yes. This won't be an easy read for Chelsea fans, but I really enjoyed my time at Tottenham. We had a fantastic team under Harry Redknapp, with the likes of Gareth Bale and Luka Modric. I get stick from a minority of Blues fans, but it hasn't bothered me.

Tell us about Iceland's summer of 2016...
Just qualifying for the Euros was a massive achievement in itself. We arrived with zero pressure and managed to go unbeaten in our group against Austria, Hungary and Portugal. There was an amazing feeling of unity within the squad and we really sensed we were doing something special – ask any Icelandic to name their best summer and it would be 2016. Obviously, beating England 2-1 – from behind – was a huge statement on the world stage and our best achievement as a nation to date. We were mentally exhausted by the time we had to face the hosts, France, in the quarter-finals, but we'd earned the respect of the world by then.

KHALID BOULAHROUZ

"AFTER OUR CLASH AGAINST PORTUGAL IN 2006, RONALDO WOULDN'T EVEN LOOK AT ME WHEN WE MET AT EURO 2012"

The tough-tackling ex-Chelsea defender on Euro 2008 heartbreak and how he got his 'Cannibal' moniker

Interview Guus Hetterscheid



TEAMS
RKC Waalwijk
Hamburg
Chelsea
Sevilla (loan)
Stuttgart
Sporting
Brondby
Feyenoord
Netherlands

How was your relationship with Martin Jol, who gave you your professional debut?
Jol played a very important role at the start of my career. Before I came to RKC [Waalwijk] I had a tough time in the youth academy of AZ Alkmaar when I lost my father at the age of 16. I was no longer myself and it affected my performances. AZ didn't want to continue with me and I understood. RKC felt like a new start. Jol spent a lot of time with me. He was very critical, but he always had constructive criticism. He said that to get right to the top, one has to do more than the competition. If someone runs 7km, you have to run eight. Never lean back – that was his message. I've never forgotten that.

Did Jol ever approach you about a transfer to Tottenham when he was their manager?
No, he didn't. When Jol became the manager of Tottenham, I'd just joined Hamburg in the Bundesliga. As a boy I wanted to go to Spain or England, but then HSV crossed my path. I didn't have to think long – HSV is a great club and Hamburg a great city. I also quickly found my way in the Bundesliga. During my second year, we were second behind Bayern Munich for a long time and beat them both home and away; unfortunately, we lost the derby against Werder Bremen on the last day and ended up third. We had a superb squad, including my compatriots Nigel de Jong and Rafael van der Vaart, and qualified for the Champions League.

Did you like the nickname you soon picked up at Hamburg: 'Cannibal'?
Some German reporters came up with that nickname. I hadn't even played one minute for HSV then, but the newspaper said, "The Cannibal has signed a contract until 2008". I decided to build a good relationship with the journalists who came to HSV. I talked to

them about another nickname, as I wanted to set a better example to children, but those journalists said, "Boulah, you're a footballing cannibal for eliminating your opponents on the field". I couldn't change it. I just accepted it. I also knew they used it in a positive way.

After two seasons at HSV, you moved to Jose Mourinho's Chelsea and got a rather unusual shirt number for a defender...
Yeah, that's right: No.9. That was the result of a misunderstanding with the kit man. He asked me which number I wanted to play with and first he suggested all kinds of high numbers, but I didn't want to wear 54 or 36 or anything like that. Then he said, "Nine is still free". I thought, 'Let's do that'. That was instantly registered, and a day later I found out that No.2 was also available...

How do you look back on Mourinho?
Jose does everything to win games. He asks a lot of his players, but that usually results in success – just look at his trophy cabinet. You can't relax for a moment. Mourinho really can't stand losing. Luckily, we often won with Chelsea at that time. We won the FA Cup and the League Cup. The level of the team was very high. I had to stand my ground against attackers such as Andriy Shevchenko, Didier Drogba and Arjen Robben every day during training sessions – that makes you stronger and smarter as a defender.

What was your experience of Sevilla, going there on loan in 2007 and immediately beating Real Madrid in the Supercopa?
Sevilla manager Juande Ramos wanted me there. Everything went according to plan in the beginning, but then I injured my groin. It was a complicated injury and I was sidelined for quite a long time. Ramos left and Manolo Jimenez came over from the second team, and he chose other guys at my expense. But I still have fond memories of my time there. We had a great team. Jesus Navas and Dani Alves demolished opponents – it looked like Dani Alves had more than two lungs. He just kept running. Together with Renato, Adriano and Luis Fabiano, he created a very positive atmosphere: there was often Brazilian music on and loads of laughter.

You left Chelsea permanently in 2008 for reigning Bundesliga champions Stuttgart...
In my first year, we were again competing for the title. We had to beat Bayern on the final day to have a chance, but Wolfsburg, our biggest competitor, also won and they became champions. In the following years, results were disappointing and there were many managerial changes, which didn't turn out too well. I worked with Markus Babbel, someone with a great career as a player, but I wasn't impressed with him as a manager. After four years at Stuttgart I joined Sporting, in Portugal, but it wasn't the adventure I was hoping for: after my first season, I still had a contract for two years but suddenly had to train with the second team for no reason. You're bullied away to make room for new players. Such dirty games are fairly common throughout football.

How did you find your spells with Brondby and Feyenoord, before retiring in 2016?
In retrospect I shouldn't have returned to the Netherlands, even though Feyenoord are a great club. My last match ended with a red card against Groningen. I tried to keep some guys apart in a fight and got pushed in the process; I lost my balance and hit someone's face with my hand. I was quite surprised that I got a red. I didn't know then that it would be my last professional game. After Feyenoord, I wanted to move to the USA, China or the Middle East, but there were no interesting offers. I retired and I've never regretted it. My career could have been better but could have been worse. I'm happy with what I achieved.

Marco van Basten selected you for his 2006 World Cup and Euro 2008 squads. How was your relationship with him?
We got along well and needed just a few words to understand each other. When I was fit, I often played under Van Basten. At that World Cup, we reached the quarter-finals and faced Portugal in the infamous match with all of the yellow and red cards. I was facing Cristiano Ronaldo and that went well at the start. When I wanted to stop him with a tactical challenge, I tackled him pretty hard on the thigh – that wasn't my intention, of course, but he was substituted afterwards. Luis Figo then became my opponent and I noticed that he was out to get me a second yellow card. He went to ground when he felt my hand during a foot race. Regrettably, that game went down as a dark day for football. Wesley Sneijder joked about it when we met Portugal again at Euro 2012: we were in the tunnel and he said to Ronaldo, "Look who's there – your friend, Boulah". Cristiano didn't laugh. He wouldn't even look at me.

Which of your 35 caps stands out most?
There were Euro 2008's group victories over France and Italy – we could have won the trophy but it wasn't our day in the quarters against Russia – but personally, the World Cup semi-final against Uruguay in 2010 was my most special match with the Netherlands. It was a great tournament. Frustratingly we lost the final to Spain. The disappointment is huge, especially in walking past the trophy.



THE MIXER

THE BEST OF FOOTBALL

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DESIGN • TECH



ADIDAS PREDATOR ELITE TONGUE FG X Y-3 £350
prodirectsport.com
Could this be the one – the best-looking boots ever made? They're so good, you'd have to win a lottery to own a pair. "This is a strictly limited release for customers chosen by Pro:Direct Sport," according to the website. The cleats form part of a collection that comprises a Real Madrid Y-3 fourth strip, training gear and goalkeeper gloves, with the name stitched into the tongue that of fashion designer Yohji Yamamoto, known for his avant-garde style. Only Real Madrid could really handle this vibe.

GOT GEAR? **GET IT IN THE MIXER** SEND IT TO **@KETCHELLFC** ON INSTAGRAM



CFC GENOA KAPPA FOURTH KIT £85

kappa.com

A long-sleeved Kappa shirt just hits differently. Genoa have endured an on-off relationship with the Italian brand, so this is a throwback to when the pair first met in the late '90s. Inspired by the 1999-00 kit, the new version brings a classic into the modern era and made it as much a lifestyle option as a performance item. After a flirtation with Castore, can Genoa and Kappa reconcile for the kids?



ENGLAND 1990 BUCKET HAT £16.99

theterracestore.com

Bucket hat season is here, so pull one of England's most instantly recognisable sublimation shirt patterns over your bonce because it's about to start raining watery lager. Nothing yells 'coming home' like the design of England's Umbro third kit from Italia 90, and it's a tragedy that it was worn only once (for a 1-0 win over Turkey in which Dennis Wise hit the winner). We prefer not to speak...

OAKLEY LATCH PANEL SUNGLASSES

£174

oakley.com

Hey, Kylian! Marty McFly wants his shades back. Oakley call these 'Latch Panel', featuring special side shields secured by a latch mechanism that reduces peripheral glare. A cylindrical lens offers a stronger field of view, while thinner ear stems allow you to wear them under a hat or helmet comfortably and the latch makes them easy to attach to a shirt. So, they're practical, harder to misplace *and* sported by Mbappe. We're sold.



ADMIRAL 50 BOOK £45

admiralsports.com

Clear some space on your coffee table, there's a new book in town. Fifty years ago, Admiral decided to start producing replica football shirts for people to buy – billions of pounds later, they've released this stunning tome to commemorate the milestone. It's full of original photography of the company's most iconic kits and the tales behind them, with contributions from fans and players. Just 1,974 copies of the individually-numbered opus are being printed, so no dilly-dallying.

England '80–'82









Making history in Admiral – Viv Anderson















VELOCITA ELIXIR PRO FG

£185

umbro.co.uk

Can we have a quick word, Umbro? "Velocita". Yep, that'll do. England's double diamond mob are toasting their 100th year of business with stylish product drops left right and centre. Here's the latest incarnation of their legendary Velocita lineage, a boot made for nimble players whose game is built on short, sharp bursts of speed. It's light, thin, fits close to the foot for added control and would look ace with a Newcastle kit.





CORTEIZ CLUB RTW JERSEY £199.95

originkicks.co.uk

Corteiz RTW ('Rules The World') are a bubbling UK streetwear brand, launched in 2017, worn by Stormzy and Drake and co-signed to Nike – three big deals in their industry. Like a host of similar streetwear labels, they're tapping into the football shirt scene and have unveiled this twist on Mexican side Club America's 1994-95 epic. A fine jersey to riff off, even if Carlos Valderrama never graced it.

MALAGA 120TH ANNIVERSARY HUMMEL SHIRT £TBC

malagacf.com

A beautiful reproduction of one of Malaga's most adored kits, worn during the 1988-89 season when they made a triumphant return to the top flight – a far cry from their current status in the wilderness of the third tier. Tivilo is a loved amusement park and landmark which holds a deep emotional connection with fans, while the crest pays homage to the vintage badge of the era. Perfection.

ASR ORIGINS JERSEY £85

adidas.co.uk

Roma paraded this humdinger in the most recent *Derby della Capitale* against Lazio – a modern-classic tribute to similar strips seen throughout the '90s and early 2000s. Roma won 1-0, though as far as we can tell there was no particular anniversary linked to the latest Eternal City showdown. Few clubs have been on a run of kits like the Giallorossi in the last decade – this could be the zenith.

SHOP WINDOW

The definitive shopping guide for the football fan

MY PERFECT XI

IZZY CHRISTIANSEN



The former Manchester City midfielder and Lioness plumps for many of the Euro 2022-winning line-up, a smattering of Lyon stars and even a Ballon d'Or winner...



THE GAFFER



NICK CUSHING

"Nick has a next-level football brain to deliver what he wants. He knows the game inside out, back to front and in every way possible. I love his passion – I've never seen anything like it."

THE SUBS

01 EUGENIE LE SOMMER

02 GRIEDGE MBOCK

03 DAMARIS EGURROLA

KAREN BARDSLEY

"She was an exceptional team-mate for Manchester City and England and a brilliant presence in goal. You always felt safe with her at the back. In the modern game, she'd still be pretty effective in a team that perhaps didn't play out from the back. She tried to develop the game as it grew, and was a quality goalkeeper who kept you in games."

LUCY BRONZE

"I don't need to say much more. She's redefined the full-back role in the women's game. We didn't see attacking full-backs until Lucy Bronze emerged and everyone has tried to follow suit. A proper winner."

WENDIE RENARD

"I'm putting Wendie in at centre-back next to Rikke Sevecke because they'd complement each other. She read the game so well at Lyon and if you've got two full-backs getting forward on either flank, she'd be important to provide some stable communication and keep everything else in check."

RIKKE SEVECKE

"Rikke, a Danish international, was a team-mate during my second spell at Everton. She was always a really calming presence at the back with excellent distribution, possessing similar qualities to Wendie alongside her."

DEMI STOKES

"Demi is always very reliable and is similar to Lucy Bronze on the other side of the defence, in some ways. She used Lucy as a bit of a role model while playing on the same Manchester City team and started bombing forward from left-back. I always like to have a team where both full backs go forward."

KEIRA WALSH

"I'm picking Keira for obvious reasons – her just in front of Renard and Sevecke would provide a nice base. My football philosophy is very attack-minded, with intelligent players who can put out counter-attacks just by reading the game and Keira is exceptional at that. One of the best in the world on the ball in that position, too.

JILL SCOTT

"I couldn't ignore Jill – for Manchester City and England, she competed right up until the end of her career. She was good at everything, with a driving force to can provide that goalscoring threat from midfield and in the box. Picked for her engine and drive – she was a leader."

DZSENIFER MAROZSAN

"At Lyon, Dzsenifer is someone who can unlock a defence with one little pass and sees things a lot of other people don't see. Her technical detail is probably up there with the best in the game and I'd definitely have her as the luxury player in this system."

NIKITA PARRIS

"I struggled to pick a right-winger at first because there were a few who I played with who crossed my mind, but I decided to go with Nikita. I played with her a lot at City and she assisted me a lot, so that helps, but the fluid role she played there took her game to the next level – and having her on the right would work well with Lucy behind her."

ADA HEGERBERG

"Ada [below] has a similar mentality to Lucy in that she'll do anything to win. Her desire inside the box is unrivalled and she'd be a brilliant focal point for the wingers and the full-backs to get crosses to. One of the best players in the history of the women's game."



AMEL MAJRI

"Amel is a French international I played with at Lyon, and she can play off the left or right wing. She would complement either full-back really well by coming inside and combining with them, and is unbelievable with the ball at her feet. Just a fantastic, intelligent player."

Chris Evans

YOUR NEXT FOURFOURTWO IS ON SALE JUNE 6

FourFourTwo

EURO 2024 GUIDE

YOUR EUROS STARTS HERE!



FIXTURES • TEAM PROFILES • STAR PLAYERS









UEFA EURO 2020






CONTENTS

After the last European Championship was spread around the continent and delayed due to the pandemic, things are back to normal this summer with Germany hosting the tournament and stadiums jam-packed again. Anyone who remembers the 2006 World Cup in Germany will know that we're in for a treat, and all 24 countries will kick off with dreams and aspirations of reaching the Berlin finale on July 14. In this guide we'll give you the lowdown on every side and the grounds they'll be visiting, plus our tips for the Golden Boot and 24 reasons why this Euros will be *wunderbar*. Enjoy!

James

James Andrew
@JamesAndrew_ @FourFourTwo

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24 REASONS WHY EURO 2024 WILL BE COSMIC

Britain's best educator since the keyboardist in D:Ream, tipsy kilt-wearers and WAGs on the rampage – there's so much to get excited about this summer...

Words Nick Moore



01 THE FIRST 'NORMAL' TOURNAMENT SINCE 2018

The 2020s have been a very weird decade. Euro 2020 took place a year late amid the twitchy, anti-social fug of COVID, while Qatar 2022 was dogged by human rights shame and the fact you can't have a barbecue in December without getting either drenched or pneumonia. Praise be for a simple, guilt-free tournament held in sunburn season.

02 ALBÄRT THE BEAR

The 2006 World Cup was blighted by Goleo and Pille, a blundering boss-eyed German lion and talking football respectively. The pair set a low bar for this occasion's mascot, which has barely scraped it with the oafish ursine that is Albärt, who will at least make a less horrifying toy for the kids.

03 PARTY LIKE IT'S 2006

The Germans are *wunderbar* at many things, from crank-shaft engineering to mixing malted grains and water, but hosting football tournaments might be their finest talent. Anyone who attended the 2006 World Cup will recall a dizzyingly delightful affair, from the seamless travel to the friendly fan parks chock-full of frothing steins and gleaming bratwurst. Expect similar joy.

04 DAS FUSSBALLLIEBE

The boffins at Adidas have made some cracking footballs in recent years, but they've surpassed themselves with the lovely 'Fussballliebe', which is vaguely reminiscent of a Joan Miro painting and (as usual) boasts "unparalleled accuracy and control".

05 SCOUT THE STARS

The Euros are a great opportunity to get out your grubby notebook and run the rule over the next generation. Can France's silky Warren Zaire-Emery, Turkey's thrilling Kenan Yildiz or Spain's barely-out-of-nappies wunderkid Lamine Yamal make the next steps towards greatness?

06 THE TARTAN ARMY

It never feels quite right without them: the drunkest, but least hostile army on Earth are expected to mobilise a Scottish ground force of 100,000. Just don't run out of beer, lads.

07 HOTELS, HOTELS, HOTELS!

A cursory internet search suggests there are 990,000 hotel rooms in Germany, compared with just 38,000 in Qatar, all of which were booked by Wales fans six seconds after they qualified. Better yet this summer, they'll be built from actual bricks instead of cardboard.

08 TURKEY 'HOME GAMES'

Turkish fans are famously feverish, so expect Germany's massive immigrant population to create an atmosphere straight outta Gala when the Crescent-Stars take to the field.

09 GEORGIA'S DEBUT

None of the Caucasus triumvirate of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia had ever qualified for a major tournament until the latter won the play-offs, leaving commentators all over Europe in despair. Kvaratskhelia, Zivzivadze Kochorashvili... it's pronunciation hell.

10 RETURN OF THE WAGS?

Back in 2006, England's golden generation of wives and girlfriends, spearheaded by Cheryl Cole, Coleen Rooney and Victoria Beckham, went apes**t drinking peach bellinis round Baden-Baden, creating a paparazzi supernova. This time, England drop anchor at a five-star hotel with two-and-a-half golf courses in the Weimar village of Blankenhain. Can a brand new wave of heroes bent on mayhem emerge?!



11 FOND(ISH) FAREWELLS

This will surely be a swansong for Cristiano Ronaldo (his sixth Euros), Luka Modric and Europe's narkiest defender, Pepe. It won't be the same without his uniquely unpleasant behaviour.

12 SERBIA MAKE IT!

Despite qualifying for three World Cups, Serbia oddly hadn't reached the Euros since the 2006 split from Montenegro – their last involvement was as FR Yugoslavia, reaching the quarter-finals at Euro 2000. This time they're finally here.

13 BELLINGHAM BACK IN GERMANY

Jude (right) was born in Stourbridge but made in Borussia Dortmund. He's a stark contrast to the old days when Little Englanders used to fear the funny food abroad – will he thrive in the country where he became a star?

14 PICKFORD'S MEGA JUMBOTRON CHALLENGE

The highlight of England's clammy 1-0 win against Paraguay in 2006 was Paul Robinson putting his giant northern boot through an upfield punt so mightily that he struck the Waldstadion's whopping telly, hanging from the roof above the centre circle. Can fellow berserker Jordan Pickford repeat the feat, in the same ground, against Denmark?!

15 HISTORY TIME WITH COISTY

Ally McCoist is now, unexpectedly, one of British TV's top educators on a par with Brian Cox, Mary Beard and Duggee. Expect him to have done his research and drop in all kinds of info nuggets about Middle Ages Romania.

16 FORZA ITALIA

A tournament without the Azzurri just isn't right: they've got the best anthem, the best hairdos and are the best at making quasi-religious hand gestures to officials after not getting a throw-in. Post-World Cup hiatus, having the champs back here was a must.

17 NEW RULES

There are some minor changes from 2020 to contend with: a microchip in 'Fussballliebe' will either help to clear up handball disputes, or alternatively cause Matt Le Tissier and his merry band of COVID conspiracy theorists to claim Bill Gates is masterminding the event. Swings and roundabouts.

18 ICONIC STADIUMS

From the home of the iconic Yellow Wall in Dortmund to Harry Kane's new stomping ground in Munich; from Berlin's history-soaked Olympiastadion to the beautiful Arena AufSchalke, this is as impressive a line-up of bowls as we've seen anywhere.

19 UKRAINE MAKING THEIR POINT

When Serhiy Rebrov's men qualified via the play-offs, the first thing shown on TV was a fan holding up a flag saying 'F**k Putin'. Expect plenty more where that came from.

20 PAUL'S PRETENDERS

Paul the Octopus was a breakout star of the 2010 World Cup – a soft-bodied cephalopod who correctly predicted all seven of Germany's results. The mystic mollusc died months later – before he could do anything properly useful – and has spawned legions of imitators, hundreds of which will rear their suckers, beaks and so forth this summer.



Clockwise from top "Has Bill Gates put a chip in this?"; the Yellow Wall in Dortmund; the happy-go-lucky Scots; bratwurst is a food staple

21 GOLDEN GAFFERS

The managerial line-up for Euro 2024 looks fascinating. Ex-Arsenal defender Sylvinho is a legend in Albania, while there's a gaggle of Julian Nagelsmann-like thirtysomethings and also wily old dogs like Ronald Koeman and Luciano Spalletti. Something for all!

22 RECORD CROWDS

Euro 2016 in France smashed tournament attendance records – 2,427,303 people got in on the action – but that can be surpassed in Germany. And no social distancing, yay!

23 NORMAL TELLY

Satellite money men still haven't got their grubby trotters on the Euros: the BBC have nabbed two England and two Scotland group games; ITV have one of each and first pick of the last 16 and semi-final matches. Expect *Coronation Street* to be delayed. A lot.

24 ENGLAND'S BEST SHOT IN DECADES

The Three Lions have never won the Euros. History buffs may also recall that they haven't won a major trophy since 1966. It feels like Gareth Southgate is ready to terminate 58 years of English dross, right? Ah, there we go, we've cursed it again. See you in 2026!

THE VENUES

From Goals of the Century to lightning Bolts, via the odd crustacean, Euro 2024's stadia have plenty of history



OLYMPIASTADION
BERLIN

Opened 1936 **Capacity** 71,000
Club Hertha Berlin
Did you know? Germany's biggest all-seater has hosted the 2006 World Cup Final, Usain Bolt's 100m and 200m world records and a Pope Benedict mass in 2011.

ARENA AUFSCHALKE
GELSENKIRCHEN

Opened 2001 **Capacity** 50,000
Club Schalke
Did you know? Built (carefully) above disused shafts in the proud mining city, it has a retractable roof and pitch, on an 11,000-tonne track. Looks a bit like a woodlouse.





RHEINENERGIESTADION
COLOGNE

Opened 1923 **Capacity** 43,000
Club FC Köln
Did you know? Rebuilt for the 2006 World Cup, Köln's home is easy to spot with four illuminated corner towers. It has given the Rolling Stones shelter five times.

VOLKSPARKSTADION
HAMBURG

Opened 1925 **Capacity** 49,000
Club Hamburg
Did you know? The People's Park's eras span a 1925 build, 1953 refit and 90-degree rotation in 2000. Taylor Swift plays here in July, after a *Cruel Summer* for some teams.





WESTFALENSTADION
DORTMUND

Opened 1974 **Capacity** 62,000
Club Borussia Dortmund
Did you know? A subterranean unexploded bomb delayed an early-noughties rebuild. The Yellow Wall terrace – Europe's biggest for standing – will be all-seater.

RED BULL ARENA
LEIPZIG

Opened 2004 **Capacity** 40,000
Club RB Leipzig
Did you know? East Germany's only Euro 2024 venue, on the disused Zentralstadion site, is also home to RB Leipzig matches and Coldplay gigs. Can't have it all.





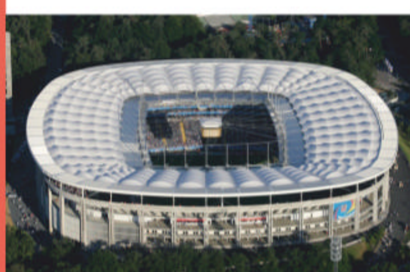
MERKUR SPIEL-ARENA
DUSSELDORF

Opened 2004 **Capacity** 47,000
Club Fortuna Dusseldorf
Did you know? Azerbaijan won Eurovision here in 2011 and Tyson Fury the world heavyweight title in 2015 – it's multi-purpose (evidently), with a retractable roof.

ALLIANZ ARENA
MUNICH

Opened 2005 **Capacity** 66,000
Club Bayern Munich
Did you know? The illuminated exterior of 3,000 inflatable plastic panels was a world first. It hosted Germany's first regular season NFL game (Seattle vs Tampa) in 2022.





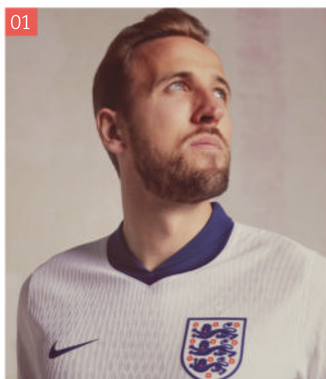
WALDSTADION
FRANKFURT

Opened 1925 **Capacity** 47,000
Club Eintracht Frankfurt
Did you know? The venerable arena has witnessed Muhammad Ali defending his world title against Karl Mildenberger in 1966 and four Depeche Mode concerts.

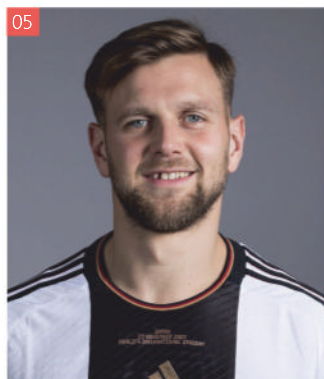
MHPARENA
STUTTGART

Opened 1933 **Capacity** 51,000
Club VfB Stuttgart
Did you know? The venue for Klaus Fischer's Goal of the Century overhead kick against Switzerland in 1977 was remodelled in 2009 featuring a distinctive fabric roof.




01

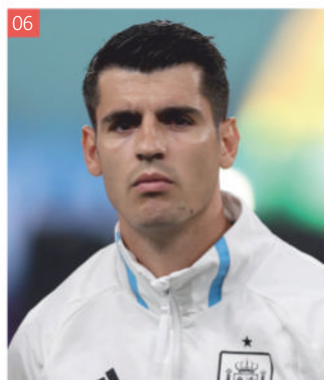

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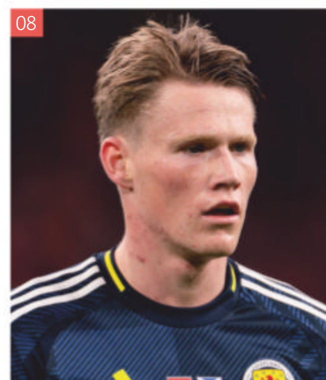

05


07


02


04


06


08

THE RACE FOR THE GOLDEN BOOT

Who can emulate Gerd Muller, Michel Platini, Marco van Basten and, er, Savo Milosevic as a Euros top scorer?

Words Si Hawkins

01 HARRY KANE

England **Age** 30

Still banging them in as Bayern Munich stuttered, Kane will relish the chance to bolster his tumbleweedy trophy cabinet – one that does boast a World Cup Golden Boot, lest we forget. The Bundesliga's winter break, while most of his England team-mates were being flogged to dust, could help him to stay club-sharp for the whole tournament.

02 KYLIAN MBAPPE

France **Age** 25

Moving house is stressful for the best of us. Bring down the personalised Louis Vuitton basketball hoop or just buy a new one? Tricky. Mbappe looked flat as France failed three years ago, missing the crucial shootout spot-kick against Switzerland, and flirting with Real Madrid may distract him here.

03 CRISTIANO RONALDO

Portugal **Age** 39

Unlike Jordan Henderson (in so many ways), CR7 was pretty confident about keeping his Euros place despite plying his trade in the contentious Petrodollar Premier – 10 goals in qualifying backed that up. Portugal landed a sweet group draw, too, but Roberto Martinez loves to rotate mid-tournament – will that limit the pouting icon's quest for gold?

04 ROMELU LUKAKU

Belgium **Age** 30

The semi-veteran Roma loanee – yes, somehow he *still* belongs to Chelsea – is no busted flush, having scored freely at the 2018 World Cup and Euro 2020, then netted 14 goals in eight qualifiers here when the next-best haul was 10. Rom wasn't remotely fit for Belgium's 2022 Qatarstrophe – what about now?

05 NICLAS FULLKRUG

Germany **Age** 31

It's always nice to see a major nation's attack led by a bloke who resembles a painter-decorator (see also: Kane, H.) but, as Germany's top scorer over the past 12 months, Fullkrug deserves a bit more respect. Though it's unclear if he will start ahead of Kai Havertz, he did score twice from the bench in Qatar and has strengthened his claim since.

06 ALVARO MORATA

Spain **Age** 31

The Atletico Madrid man often appears mildly haunted by his stop-start career, yet he's the non-false nine Spain need in these post-tiki-taka times. Italy and Croatia won't offer much change in the group, but La Roja's skipper could score four against Albania and take the prize by accident. He's a decent outside bet.

07 RASMUS HOJLUND

Denmark **Age** 21

This could be quite the end-of-season redemption story, given that Hojlund, pre-Christmas, apparently represented everything wrong with Manchester United's post-Fergie recruitment. Even then he was bagging goals in Europe, for club and country, and Denmark meet-ups must feel particularly *hygge* compared to the Old Trafford turmoil.

08 SCOTT McTOMINAY

Scotland **Age** 27

An each-way outsider, McTominay hit a magnificent seven in qualifying, more than Robert Lewandowski or Erling Haaland. Word to the wise: with that never-say-die spirit and eye for a late equaliser/winner, Manchester United's ultra-fit cowboy-jawed midfielder is always a good bet for last goalscorer.

GROUP A






FIXTURES

All UK game times

Friday, June 14
8pm: Germany vs Scotland (ITV)

Saturday, June 15
2pm: Hungary vs Switzerland (ITV)

Wednesday, June 19
5pm: Germany vs Hungary (BBC)
8pm: Scotland vs Switzerland (BBC)

Sunday, June 23
8pm: Switzerland vs Germany (BBC)
8pm: Scotland vs Hungary (BBC)

SWITZERLAND

GERMANY

SCOTLAND

HUNGARY



SWITZERLAND



At Euro 2020, Switzerland's would-be golden generation secured the Nati's first tournament knockout win since 1938 in a cleansing shootout against France. But reality bit hard in Qatar as they failed in the last 16 yet again with a harrowing 6-1 loss to Portugal.

That generation of 2009 Under-17 World Cup winners and 2011 European U21 runners-up, which includes Granit Xhaka, Xherdan Shaqiri (left), Ricardo Rodriguez and Yann Sommer, are now in their 30s. A new one must emerge.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Cut out the late goals. In four of their last seven qualifiers, they led in the 81st minute or later but fell to draws.

STRENGTHS

Their attack, once so anaemic, now gives them reason to believe. While still conservative at times, Switzerland no longer flounder when requiring more than one goal to get a result – they netted at least twice in each of their first seven qualifying matches, despite the absence of first-choice centre-forward Breel Embolo due to a ruptured ACL. Next-gen member Zeki Amdouni, the 23-year-old Burnley signee, top-scored in their qualifying group with six goals from six starts.

WEAKNESSES

Their defence, once so reliable, now cripples Switzerland with disastrous performances at inopportune times. That drubbing by Portugal in Qatar is no isolated incident: the Swiss shipped three goals at home to Belarus, two away to Kosovo and two after the 88th minute to group winners Romania. They even let Andorra score. Though undermined by inconsistency and injuries, manager Murat Yakin is partly to blame for shifting tactics between three- and four-man defensive units. Manuel Akanji and Nico Elvedi are centre-back studs, Sommer a veteran keeper, and yet there's not much faith that they can keep opponents at bay.

> THEIR DEFENCE, ONCE VERY RELIABLE, NOW CRIPPLES THEM AT INOPPORTUNE TIMES



THE MANAGER

Soon after Switzerland's lacklustre qualifying campaign ended, the FA issued a statement saying **Murat Yakin** "has our full confidence", which you shouldn't have to say if it's true. Vladimir Petkovic elevated expectations thanks to the most successful tenure in Swiss football history, so Yakin, in charge since 2021, needs a strong showing here.



STAR PLAYER

A crucial stabilising force, **Granit Xhaka** anchors the midfield and has proudly donned the armband for five years. Along with precision passing and typically aggressive defending, the 31-year-old also scored twice in qualifying – his first international goals since 2019. He's in peak form for Bayer Leverkusen, guiding them to Bundesliga glory.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 15, Hungary
Cologne, 2pm
June 19, Scotland
Cologne, 8pm
June 23, Germany
Frankfurt, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Republic of Ireland (A) 1-0
vs Denmark (A) 0-0
vs Romania (A) 0-1
vs Kosovo (H) 1-1
vs Israel (N) 1-1
vs Belarus (H) 3-3

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNE	**1992** DNQ
1964 DNQ	**1996** Group
1968 DNQ	**2000** DNQ
1972 DNQ	**2004** Group
1976 DNQ	**2008** Group
1980 DNQ	**2012** DNQ
1984 DNQ	**2016** Last 16
1988 DNQ	**2020** QF

MOST LIKELY TO...

Sack their manager mid-tournament. Yakin's stock plunged with a solitary victory in their final seven qualifiers.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Beat their hosts and neighbours – the Nati have nine wins from 53 attempts.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Win a knockout game.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

A first group-stage exit since the 2010 World Cup, unless they beat Hungary.

FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Sommer
RB Widmer
CB Akanji
CB Elvedi
LB Rodriguez
DM Zakaria
CM Freuler
CM Xhaka
RW Okafor
CF Embolo
LW Vargas

Words Matthew Walthert



GERMANY

After three tournament disasters in a row, Germany go into a European Championship on home soil under immense pressure. Stability and confidence need restoring to a team just as lost in the wilderness as the last time they solo-hosted a major tournament: the 2006 World Cup.

Prematurely booted out at Bayern Munich, manager Julian Nagelsmann must swiftly re-establish his big-stage reputation as the face of Germany's young coaching generation. The 36-year-old replaced Hansi Flick last September after a 4-1 humbling by Japan – a third successive defeat – but with no qualification campaign to focus the mind, the hosts' new boss has had to make do with friendlies.

A draw against Mexico and defeats to Turkey and Austria felt as if little had improved, but Nagelsmann's Germany then relit their fire in March. Sparked by a superb Toni Kroos, back for good from retirement like a Robbie Williams superfan attending a Take That gig, Germany handled France (2-0) and the Netherlands (2-1) impressively well, showing a strong defence and ruthless attacking quality. The experience of Kroos, a five-time Champions League winner, is vital for a side still reliant on its golden leaders.

Hope sprung in spring, and the home nation is now looking forward to their own tournament. Kroos' return also meant that captain Ilkay Gundogan took on the No.10 role, and the system

IN 2006, THE HOSTS UNEXPECTEDLY MADE THE SEMIS. A REPEAT WOULD DO THE TRICK

blossomed with the skipper flanked by Jamal Musiala and Bayer Leverkusen tyro Florian Wirtz. Leroy Sané, the joint-most prolific homegrown creator in the Bundesliga this term, affords the coach another approach.

Whichever pieces Nagelsmann opts to deploy, they have to fit together in June as well as they did in March. Before that, a coherent system had been conspicuous by its absence; in a calamitous experiment against Turkey, Kai Havertz, likely to be a false nine this summer, even featured as an extremely false left-back. This group has great individuals in many – not all – positions, and must become a team.

Of the class of 2014 – which doesn't include Gundogan, who missed that World Cup through injury – those who remain are set for their last waltzes. Manuel Neuer (38), Thomas Muller (34, top right) and the returning Kroos (34) will not feature in two years' time.

Eighteen years ago, Germany came from nowhere to reach the semi-finals on home soil. A repeat would do nicely.

Words Jonathan Harding



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 14, Scotland
Munich, 8pm
June 19, Hungary
Stuttgart, 5pm
June 23, Switzerland
Frankfurt, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Netherlands (H) 2-1
vs France (A) 2-0
vs Austria (A) 0-2
vs Turkey (H) 2-3
vs Mexico (N) 2-2
vs USA (A) 3-1

EUROS RECORD*

1960 DNE	**1992** Finalists
1964 DNE	**1996 Winners**
1968 DNQ	**2000** Group
1972 Winners	**2004** Group
1976 Finalists	**2008** Finalists
1980 Winners	**2012** SF
1984 Group	**2016** SF
1988 SF	**2020** Last 16

*1960-1988 as West Germany



LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Find an edge quickly, given they haven't played a competitive fixture since the *Gotterdammerung* that was the 2022 World Cup began with defeat to Japan and never recovered. The recent pair of friendlies may only be a snapshot, but they have helped Germany to settle on something close to a starting XI and come together, on and off the field, in the space of a week. Now they just need to stay together. Underwhelming seasons for behemoths Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund have spread the squad opportunities far and wide.

STRENGTHS

Kroos' ability to read and dictate the game remains elite. On top of that, the squad's myriad playmaking ability is potentially match-changing – Musiala, Sané, Wirtz, Gundogan, Havertz... they have so many ways to strike, as well as scythe-over-sickle Niclas Fullkrug. They've found their groove – stick to it.

WEAKNESSES

Still the easy-to-target full-backs. With Kroos' return and Joshua Kimmich's dip in form, the latter will operate at right-back; the opposite flank, though, is a mystery. Stuttgart's Maximilian Mittelstadt, 27, made his international debut earlier this year and is already the likeliest option, but most choices look concerning off the ball. At least Havertz won't be anywhere nearby. The laconic Arsenal waif may be many things – a defender isn't one of them.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Have Euro 2024's most recognisable set of teeth. Nicknamed *Lucke* ('Gap'), frontman Fullkrug and his well-spread bicuspids secured cult-hero status at Qatar 2022. Now at Dortmund, the 31-year-old late developer plundered 11 goals in his first 15 internationals and is a more than useful direct option.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Avoid having their home tournament become a stage for politics. Making it just as impactful as 2006, on the pitch and in the stands, must be a priority.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Using 2006 as their inspiration, beat the Scots in the tournament opener and ride the crest of a wave into a first semi-final since Euro 2016. Eighteen years ago, ranked 22nd in the world, crisis-ridden Germany won each group tie and, buoyed by home fervour, ran with the momentum to the last four.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

A Tartan Army stalemate immediately puts them on the back foot, but they avoid another group-stage exit and, with the draw falling kindly, hit their semi-final goal, playing in their hugely popular pink away strip at least once.

FORMATION 4-2-3-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Neuer
RB Kimmich
CB Rudiger
CB Tah
LB Mittelstadt
DM Kroos
DM Andrich
RW Wirtz
AM Gundogan
LW Musiala
CF Havertz



THE MANAGER

For **Julian Nagelsmann**, this tournament represents a chance to prove the doubters wrong and reignite diminishing countrywide passion for the national team. The 36-year-old's start was not auspicious, but the changes in the last window suggest a coach who has got his squad in shape and is raring to outsmart any opponent.

STAR PLAYER

Bayer Leverkusen's **Florian Wirtz**, buzzing off an historic Bundesliga title victory, seems set to make this summer his own. The nimble 21-year-old, with 17 goals and 14 Werkself assists in all competitions by mid-April, will torpedo into the starting line-up, make headlines across Europe and drag Germany further along than once expected.



SCOTLAND

Steve Clarke's finest achievement in five years as Scotland manager isn't actually back-to-back qualifications for the European Championship.

Instead, it's the banishment of the 22-year-old tag that had burdened cycle after cycle of players until Euro 2020 qualification. 'Glorious failure', the most loathed phrase in Scottish football's lexicon, is uttered no more – thanks to Clarke. The regular 'SOLD OUT' signs at Hampden Park provide proof, if proof were needed, that the nation has started to hope for the best, not fear the worst.

Even the most reckless born-again optimist couldn't have predicted the Scots' five-match winning streak that began Euro 2024 qualifying. Beating Spain really made people sit up and take notice, but the comeback win in Norway was no less impressive, having been 1-0 down with three minutes to go. Edging out Georgia 2-0 in slapstick monsoon conditions felt instructive, too: a settled squad have visibly grown in confidence. Yes, no win in seven has since tempered that slightly, but this is a team on the up.

The loss of veteran goalkeeper Craig Gordon, 41, to a long-term injury could easily have been a hammer blow, but Angus Gunn's introduction between the sticks was seamless. Similarly, the extended spell on the treatment table for Grant Hanley, a Clarke favourite, allowed centre-backs Jack Hendry and Ryan Porteous to come of age in the

CLARKE'S SETUP EKES OUT EVERY OUNCE OF ABILITY FROM MESSRS McGINN & McTOMINAY

dark blue, supported by the leadership of skipper Andy Robertson and Kieran Tierney alongside them.

Nathan Patterson, Aaron Hickey – now touch and go for a place in the starting XI, after hamstring surgery – and Billy Gilmour have delivered on early promise, complementing the midfield poster boys who have served Scotland well. Clarke deserves plaudits aplenty for developing a system that squeezes every ounce of ability from John McGinn and Scott McTominay in attacking midfield. They have repaid their manager with the goals that Scotland's attack lacks – which isn't to discredit Che Adams, Lyndon Dykes or increasingly Lawrence Shankland, who defend from the front.

This is a success story that has led to an opening-night date with Germany in Munich, 26 years after facing Brazil in the first game of France 98. Nothing bold. Nothing brash. Simply a quiet determination to do themselves justice.

Clarke has made believers out of pessimists. Glorious failure no more.



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 14, Germany
Munich, 8pm
June 19, Switzerland
Cologne, 8pm
June 23, Hungary
Stuttgart, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Northern Ireland (H) 0-1
vs Netherlands (A) 0-4
vs Norway (H) 3-3
vs Georgia (A) 2-2
vs France (A) 1-4
vs Spain (A) 0-2

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNE	**1992** Group
1964 DNE	**1996** Group
1968 DNQ	**2000** DNQ
1972 DNQ	**2004** DNQ
1976 DNQ	**2008** DNQ
1980 DNQ	**2012** DNQ
1984 DNQ	**2016** DNQ
1988 DNQ	**2020** Group

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

That this is no plucky, underdog tale. Scotland were deservedly one of the first nations to guarantee their spot at Euro 2024 and were at their best when controlling possession and taking it to the (at times bewildered) opposition. The 2-0 victory over Spain at Hampden Park was a case in point, and certainly not a fluke. Carry that assurance into the group phase with nothing to fear.

STRENGTHS

This generation of Scotland players are at the peak of their powers. Stalwarts Robertson, Tierney, McGinn, McTominay and Callum McGregor have raised the bar, helping their country to shake off that lengthy spell in the international wilderness. The experience gained last time – a point at Wembley from three group games – will do them no harm.

WEAKNESSES

Scotland would do anything for a goal machine up front – the sort of top-tier talent who could win matches on their own. Shankland does it domestically for Hearts but has yet to replicate that form for his country, while Adams and Dykes are selfless, wholehearted types who bring their team-mates into play through skill and will. But, as it is, that goal machine remains elusive. Despite the 4-0 scoreline, the Scots outplayed the Dutch for much of March's defeat but were wasteful at crucial moments.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Win hearts and minds across Germany. Embraced wherever they go, the once long-suffering Tartan Army will make a celebrated return to a fully attended major tournament in another curtain-raising spectacle, while generally being loved in whatever watering hole they choose. Yes, sir, they can boogie. There are no egos among this Scotland team, either – just a relatable bunch who will run through brick walls for each other.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Be the focus of an *All Or Nothing*-style behind-the-scenes documentary. As intriguing as that would be, Clarke isn't about to open the dressing-room door for any eavesdropping camera crews.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

McTominay could inspire Scotland to go all the way and he'd just want to bang on about *that* disallowed goal against Spain in qualifying. Winner's medal around his neck. Adoring fans going absolutely cock-a-hoop behind him. Still ranting about bloody VAR.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Achieve legendary status by becoming the first Scotland team to advance to the knockout stages of a major finals. Baby steps before world domination.

FORMATION 3-4-2-1

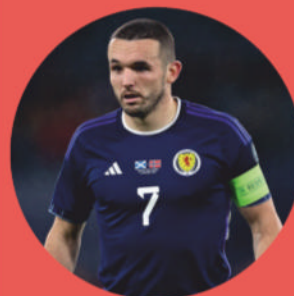


PREDICTED XI
GK Gunn
CB Porteous
CB Hendry
CB Tierney
RWB Hickey
CM Gilmour
CM McGregor
LWB Robertson
AM McTominay
AM McGinn
CF Adams



THE MANAGER

Steve Clarke gives very little away in front of the TV cameras – every word is a prisoner – so it's just as well that his work speaks for itself. Back-to-back qualifications for the Euros don't happen by accident: the 60-year-old is meticulous and tactically sound, but, more than anything, he's brought about total buy-in by instilling genuine belief.



STAR PLAYER

The real strength of this Scotland side is in the collective, but **John McGinn** is its beating heart. Few players can lift the support the way the 29-year-old does, whether it's with a driving run on the ball or some relentless pressing off it. The talismanic Aston Villa midfielder's near-one-in-three goal return for his country is something to behold.



HUNGARY



Having failed to reach a single major tournament between 1986 and 2016, Hungary are getting ready for a third successive European Championship showing, their thirst fully quenched.

The Magyars topped their Euro 2016 group ahead of fellow overachieving upstarts Iceland and eventual winners Portugal, then took points off France and Germany in the Group of Death five years on. The draw is considerably kinder this time and the Hungarians are quietly confident of ruffling feathers.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

The system works. After half a dozen years in charge, Marco Rossi knows his team perfectly. The opposition wasn't the toughest, but qualifying unbeaten, and finishing above Serbia by defeating them home and away, was remarkable nonetheless. They haven't lost a game since 2022, and that was 2-0 to Italy.

STRENGTHS

The tactical stability, progressive play and understanding between players, engendered from Rossi's long stint, are reminiscent of a club side. Wing-backs are especially important for his setup, so the emergence of 20-year-old Bournemouth defender Milos Kerkez is a blessing, as is the midfield quality of captain Dominik Szoboszlai. Hungary's tight-knit dressing room loves to upset the odds, having also stunned England twice in the 2022-23 Nations League.

WEAKNESSES

The squad's overall ability, especially up front and in central midfield, where Adam Nagy and England-born Callum Styles – loaned to second-tier Spezia and Sunderland respectively this term – will compete to be the engine-room companion to fit-again Andras Schafer.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Bring up the Mighty Magyars' 8-3 romp over West Germany at the 1954 World Cup, almost 70 years to the day before they face the host nation in Stuttgart.

THIS SQUAD LOVES TO UPSET THE ODDS AND HAVEN'T LOST A GAME SINCE 2022, TO ITALY



THE MANAGER

After bouncing around Italy's third and fourth tiers, **Marco Rossi** almost quit coaching before a 2012 visit to a friend in Budapest led to him being appointed Honved boss. Now, he's a Hungary legend. Rossi dreams of emulating the Euro 2020 triumph of pal and ex-Sampdoria colleague Roberto Mancini with his modest troops. If Greece can do it...



STAR PLAYER

Dominik Szoboszlai notched the 92nd-minute winner that guided Hungary to Euro 2020, but cruelly missed the tournament through injury. Approaching his maiden major finals after a stellar debut year at Liverpool, the 23-year-old midfielder is the first Hungarian superstar for quite some time, so fans' expectations are sky-high.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 15, Switzerland
Cologne, 2pm
June 19, Germany
Stuttgart, 5pm
June 23, Scotland
Stuttgart, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Kosovo (H) 2-0
vs Turkey (H) 1-0
vs Montenegro (H) 3-1
vs Bulgaria (A) 2-2
vs Lithuania (A) 2-2
vs Serbia (H) 2-1

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNQ	**1992** DNQ
1964 SF	**1996** DNQ
1968 DNQ	**2000** DNQ
1972 SF	**2004** DNQ
1976 DNQ	**2008** DNQ
1980 DNQ	**2012** DNQ
1984 DNQ	**2016** Last 16
1988 DNQ	**2020** Group

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Bring up the Mighty Magyars' shock 3-2 defeat to West Germany in the 1954 World Cup Final two weeks later, losing the Miracle of Bern as heavy favourites.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

That the skipper flourishes but the rest of Europe recognises Hungary aren't just "Szoboszlai and 10 other players".

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Stars-in-the-making help that wish to come true as they reach the last 16 – where they could pull off a surprise...

FORMATION 3-4-2-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Gulacsi
CB Lang
CB Orban
CB A. Szalai
RWB Nego
CM Schafer
CM Styles
LWB Kerkez
AM Sallai
AM Szoboszlai
CF Varga

Words Michael Yokhin

GROUP B








FIXTURES

All UK game times

Saturday, June 15
5pm: Spain vs Croatia (ITV)
8pm: Italy vs Albania (BBC)

Wednesday, June 19
2pm: Croatia vs Albania (ITV)

Thursday, June 20
8pm: Spain vs Italy (ITV)

Monday, June 24
8pm: Albania vs Spain (BBC)
8pm: Croatia vs Italy (BBC)

ALBANIA

ITALY

SPAIN

CROATIA



ALBANIA



Albania are Group B underdogs and wear their badge proudly.

Fanatical defending combined with deadly transitions via the flanks will be the Eagles' weapons of choice. This is only their second major tournament, the first one being Euro 2016, but if you underestimate them, they can hurt you on the counter-attack faster than you can say 'Sokol Cikalleshi'. No UEFA Nations League backdoor needed here – Albania topped their qualifying group.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Trust the senior players. Though some talented youngsters are beginning to emerge – Ernest Muci, Mario Mitaj and Kristjan Asllani, a box-to-box midfielder impressing at Inter – it was their more seasoned team-mates who produced the goods in the games that mattered. They do, however, welcome back striker Armando Broja after the 22-year-old Chelsea livewire missed their qualifying campaign through injury.

STRENGTHS

Albania's landmark wins in qualifying – the 2-0 victory over Poland and a 3-0 pummelling of the Czechs – showed what this team is all about: defending like their lives depend on it. After taking the lead in the first half, they bunkered up and not only held out but added to their advantages.

WEAKNESSES

Fighting spirit propelled them this far, but the odds are stacked against them in every part of the pitch. A 3-0 friendly defeat to Chile in March hinted at the size of Albania's task. Four clean sheets in their four home matches formed the bedrock of qualification, but they're not in Tirana any more.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Let the opponent have the ball. Poland bossed it for 72 per cent of the second half and even a 10-man Czech outfit saw twice as much of it as Albania did. Spain could top 80 per cent possession.

UNDERESTIMATE THIS TEAM AND THEY CAN HURT YOU WITH THEIR DEADLY TRANSITIONS

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 15, Italy
Dortmund, 8pm
June 19, Croatia
Hamburg, 2pm
June 24, Spain
Dusseldorf, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Sweden (A) 0-1
vs Chile (N) 0-3
vs Faroe Islands (H) 0-0
vs Moldova (A) 1-1
vs Bulgaria (H) 2-0
vs Czech Republic (H) 3-0

EUROS RECORD

1960	DNE	**1992**	DNQ
1964	DNQ	**1996**	DNQ
1968	DNQ	**2000**	DNQ
1972	DNQ	**2004**	DNQ
1976	DNE	**2008**	DNQ
1980	DNE	**2012**	DNQ
1984	DNQ	**2016**	Group
1988	DNQ	**2020**	DNQ

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Start a new fashion among neutrals. Fans wear distinctive white felt caps called *qeleshe*, *plis* or *qylaf*, if you fancy sweating your brains out in the sun.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Their guerrilla football produces some giant-killings and a place in the last 16.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

It's not crazy to think they could do it. If only one of Italy, Croatia or Spain aren't at the races on the day, that might be enough. But yes, it's unlikely.

FORMATION 4-2-3-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Berisha
RB Hysaj
CB Djimsiti
CB Ismajli
LB Mitaj
DM Ramadani
DM Asllani
RW Asani
AM N. Bajrami
LW Seferi
CF Cikalleshi



THE MANAGER

Sylvinho's managerial experience before January 2023 consisted of unsuccessful spells with Lyon and Corinthians. And yet, assisted by Pablo Zabaleta and former Boro midfielder Doriva, the ex-Arsenal left-back has worked miracles; he earned the Golden Decoration of the Eagle and Albanian citizenship within a year of taking the reins.



STAR PLAYER

For a side so reliant on keeping it tight at the back, it has to be their captain, commanding officer and header-in-chief, **Berat Djimsiti**. Like many of his team-mates, the Swiss-born 31-year-old grew up abroad when his family fled war at home, then switched allegiance to Albania later. He has made more than 200 appearances for Atalanta.

Words Alex Holiga



ITALY

If a week is a long time in politics, then Italy's Euro 2020 triumph in 2021 feels like an eternity ago.

Since the post-COVID high of that against-the-odds win which electrified the country and sparked a festival of horn-beeping, flag-waving euphoria, the comedown has been savage.

A second consecutive botched World Cup qualification campaign was an embarrassment for one of football's most decorated international sides. Then Roberto Mancini's decision to leave Italy for Saudi Arabia prompted outrage, and a nervy end to Euro 2024 qualification did nothing to assuage doubts that an upturn was imminent – all this, amid concerns over a chronic lack of young talent coming through.

Gone are bone-crunching Wembley heroes Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini. So, too, midfield schemer Marco Verratti and pint-sized winger Lorenzo Insigne, who bid farewell to their international careers in Europe by moving to Qatar and MLS respectively.

Rebuilding the Azzurri has been no easy task, neither for Mancini nor his successor, Luciano Spalletti. The coach who ended Napoli's 33-year Serie A title drought 12 months ago has had very little time to try, mind, having taken the job last August, two months into what was meant to be a relaxing sabbatical on a Tuscan vineyard.

Significant unanswered questions remain as Italy start their title defence – some of them, all too familiar. Who

GOALS REMAIN AN ISSUE, WITH NOBODY SCORING MORE THAN THREE IN QUALIFYING

will provide the goals is less clear now than it was three years ago. Designated captain Ciro Immobile has turned 34 and is struggling for form and fitness, to the extent that he was dropped for March's friendlies, as was Atalanta's Gianluca Scamacca. Mateo Retegui, Genoa's Tiger King, bagged a brace in the first friendly against Venezuela and may have earned a starting spot ahead of Giacomo Raspadori.

Then there are tactical dilemmas. After years of exclusive 4-3-3 usage, Spalletti switched to a back three in March, declaring, "I want to try the 3-4-2-1 to make some players more comfortable." Better late than never.

One thing is obvious: an Italy team that is lacking in superstars will need to perform as a unit if they are to achieve anything this summer – just as they did three years ago. Spalletti has a challenging gig, but this wily old manager knows his way around a tactics board and could prove to be more of a difference-maker than any of his players.

Words Alasdair Mackenzie



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 15, Albania
Dortmund, 8pm
June 20, Spain
Gelsenkirchen, 8pm
June 24, Croatia
Leipzig, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Ecuador (N) 2-0
vs Venezuela (N) 2-1
vs Ukraine (N) 0-0
vs North Macedonia (H) 5-2
vs England (A) 1-3
vs Malta (H) 4-0

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNE	**1992** DNQ
1964 DNQ	**1996** Group
1968 Winners	**2000** Finalists
1972 DNQ	**2004** Group
1976 DNQ	**2008** QF
1980 SF	**2012** Finalists
1984 DNQ	**2016** QF
1988 SF	**2020 Winners**



LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

The great reset is far from complete. Italy's Euro 2024 qualifying campaign was as nervy as their bid to reach the 2022 World Cup, only with a different outcome, as they snuck into second place behind England courtesy of a final-day draw against Ukraine. Even then, the irate Ukrainians fumed at the non-award of what appeared a certain late penalty, which could have sent the Azzurri into the horror of the play-offs once more. Trialling a back three after that brought wins over Venezuela and Ecuador, but hardly convincing ones.

STRENGTHS

Spalletti has shown again and again that he is an astute, flexible, intelligent manager who can get the best out of a team tactically and mentally. While it remains to be seen how this outfit will line up in their opening game, there is faith that they are in good hands.

WEAKNESSES

Scoring goals is still a big issue: nine of their 16 notched in qualifying came in two home matches against Malta and North Macedonia. Second-half drop-offs have also been troublesome, while if there is a change of style or setup, as is mooted, it will be untested at a competitive level by the time their tournament commences in Dortmund.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Enjoy a decent night's sleep. Spalletti banned consoles from training camps ahead of the tournament, saying, "You come to the national team to win the European Championship, not to win in *Call of Duty*." Early beddy-byes, lads!

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Have a Golden Boot winner. During the last World Cup qualification cycle, no Italian scored more than twice. In this campaign, midfielder Davide Frattesi led the way with three goals. Unless someone – maybe Retegui – pulls out a hitherto unseen Toto Schillaci-esque hot streak from nowhere, Italy won't be spearheaded by a prolific forward.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Spalletti has been very clear that his objective is "to win, not to participate". Few expected Italy to go all the way three years ago, so there is cautious hope that, with the bookies pricing up six or seven nations as likelier victors this summer, they'll use the underdog card to their advantage and hit their straps at the perfect moment again.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

A new-look Azzurri side boasting an unfamiliar back three battle their way through a tough group, only to crash out in the quarter-finals amid a squad revolt led by grown men desperate to be reunited with their PlayStation 5s.

FORMATION 3-4-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Donnarumma
CB Di Lorenzo
CB Acerbi
CB Bastoni
RWB Pellegrini
CM Barella
CM Jorginho
LWB Udogie
RW Chiesa
CF Retegui
LW Zaniolo



THE MANAGER

Luciano Spalletti, the mastermind of Napoli's stunning Scudetto win, has always promoted an attacking style of football and won't stop now. The 65-year-old has had less than a year to prepare for his first international tournament and only two friendlies in which he could experiment, following a nail-biting end to Italy's qualifying campaign.



STAR PLAYER

Nicolo Barella, the all-action midfielder at the heart of Inter's stunning form over the last couple of seasons, is the closest thing Italy have to an outfield star. There were hopes after Euro 2020 that Federico Chiesa would be the next Azzurri pin-up, but the winger has had a frustrating stint at Juventus – Barella, however, is in good nick.



SPAIN

We don't get much right at *FFT* – putting on our trousers the correct way round represents a proud daily achievement – so please forgive us a moment's self-congratulation.

"Spain will reach the last 16 full of hope," we penned in our 2022 World Cup preview, "at which point Alvaro Morata fluffs his lines and inevitable shootout pain ensues." Now, far be it from us to blow our own trumpet, but honk honk, eh?

With apologies to Morata, who was too anonymous to be of note, Spain's last-16 loss to Morocco from the spot following an insipid stalemate really was that predictable. It just *had* to be penalties. Only one country (sorry, Gareth) has been knocked out of more major tournament finals on shootouts than the Iberians, currently on six, and doing it three times in succession has entrenched their mental block further.

Yet a change in psyche is underway. New coach Luis de la Fuente trusts the starlets he led as Under-21s gaffer and a mere seven of Luis Enrique's 2022 World Cup squad were summoned for March's friendlies against Colombia and Brazil. Partly that's down to injury – left-back Alejandro Balde, midfield tyro Gavi and up-and-coming winger Yeremy Pino all had season-ending complaints, with Pedri, Ferran Torres and Marco Asensio only recently fit – but De la Fuente has a different groove.

Morata (above) is captain and struck four goals in qualifying, including the

SPAIN'S SHOOTOUT MENTAL BLOCK IS ENTRENCHED AFTER A TRIO OF DEFEATS

opener in a vital 2-0 win over Scotland. Matching his tally was Joselu, whose name sends shivers down the spines of Stoke and Newcastle supporters but is now seen regularly for Real Madrid and Spain, aged 34 and with two goals on his international debut last year. Dani Olmo, Nico Williams and Lamine Yamal offer superb one-on-one ability; the latter so tormented Brazil in March that he will probably start. Rodri is the best defensive midfielder in the world.

There are two ways to look at the group-of-death draw. It doesn't get much tougher than facing defending champions Italy, natural dark horses Croatia and qualifying table-toppers Albania. However, Spain beat Croatia at Euro 2020 and in the 2023 Nations League Final, while the Azzurri – their conquerors three years ago for a sixth time at a major competititon – can't crop up again until the semi-finals.

That most recent victory over Croatia was a shootout triumph to lift a trophy, no matter how minor. Surely that must have exorcised some penalty demons?

Words Andrew Murray

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 15, Croatia
Berlin, 5pm
June 20, Italy
Gelsenkirchen, 8pm
June 24, Albania
Dusseldorf, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Brazil (H) 3-3
vs Colombia (N) 0-1
vs Georgia (H) 3-1
vs Cyprus (A) 3-1
vs Norway (A) 1-0
vs Scotland (H) 2-0

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNQ	**1992** DNQ
1964 Winners	**1996** QF
1968 DNQ	**2000** QF
1972 DNQ	**2004** Group
1976 DNQ	**2008 Winners**
1980 Group	**2012 Winners**
1984 Finalists	**2016** Last 16
1988 Group	**2020** SF



LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Spain's solitary loss in their qualifying campaign, a 2-0 reverse at Hampden Park in March 2023, demands some self-reflection. Rodri summed up his side's pearl-clutching petulance when describing the Tartan Army's tactic of time-wasting by exaggerating injury as "rubbish" and "not football". Pot, meet kettle, amigos. Spain would also do well to realise that a swift dagger to the heart is no less effective a death than one by a thousand passes – it's just less aesthetically pleasing. Finish teams off when you have the chance.

STRENGTHS

Astonishing midfield depth. Few teams could replace the sidelined Gavi with such ease. PSG schemer Fabian, 28, is a De la Fuente favourite from the U21s, as is 22-year-old Alex Baena, who had 18 goal involvements for Villarreal by mid-March and netted a minute into his La Roja debut. Then there's Pedri: nine injuries in less than three years and still the 21-year-old oozes quality.

WEAKNESSES

Big-tournament experience. Morata is skipper as the only squad member with 55 or more caps and 38-year-old Jesus Navas is the sole survivor from Spain's 2008-12 trophy-winning vintage. Unai Simon, De la Fuente's goalkeeper, has the odd shaky moment. France-born go-to centre-back Robin Le Normand is new on the scene and partner Aymeric Laporte is enjoying semi-retirement at Al Nassr, but there is an alternative...

MOST LIKELY TO...

Play a literal child. Centre-back Pau Cubarsi turned 17 in January, but he's already a starter at Barcelona and can read the game better than compatriots decades older. Wideman Yamal, just 16 when the tournament commences, wears braces, lives at La Masia and, like his club-mate, can't drink, drive, vote or smoke. Spain's youngest ever player, who scored on his debut, has the impudent left-footed brilliance of a Barça-reared diminutive Argentine you may have heard of. Against Brazil, Yamal shone to such an extent that he joined Diego Maradona, Ronaldinho and Andres Iniesta as Cules to receive a standing ovation from the Bernabeu.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Give the ball away. Spain's possession obsession remains under De la Fuente, although the era of picking a vertically challenged midfielder as a false nine is over. He may even have discarded the 4-3-3 system to fit in another attacker.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A repeat of the Nations League.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

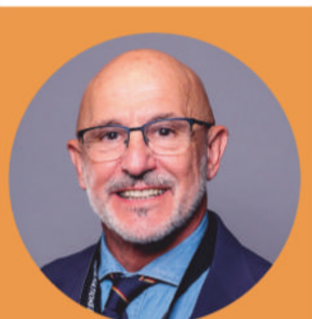
A repeat of the World Cup. Yes, *again*.

FORMATION 4-2-3-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Simon
RB Carvajal
CB Le Normand
CB Laporte
LB Gaya
DM Rodri
DM Pedri
RW Yamal
AM Olmo
LW Williams
CF Morata



THE MANAGER

Luis de la Fuente has been part of the Spanish FA fabric for a decade as a Euros-winning manager of the Under-19s and then the U21s. As senior coach, he has mined both cohorts for players. Since replacing Luis Enrique in 2022, the ex-Athletic Bilbao left-back has gone Basque to basics to make La Roja more direct, but possession is still paramount.



STAR PLAYER

At the time of writing, **Rodri** hadn't finished a competitive fixture on the losing side for club nor country in more than a year – a run that stretched back 60-plus matches to Spain's 2023 defeat to Scotland at Hampden Park. The 27-year-old Manchester City midfielder is the fulcrum around which the myriad creative waifs sprinkle their magic.



CROATIA

Things looked quite good for Croatia ahead of the Qatar World Cup.

The Vatreni's change of generations was largely complete, with Luka Modric staying as the main creative force. The skipper was beyond his prime, sure, but he could still lead, dictate play and do all of those little things that had helped to deliver a spot in the 2018 World Cup Final for his country and the Ballon d'Or for himself.

Josko Gvardiol was a rising talent in a new defensive line, while intriguing options – albeit not exactly world-class ones – had emerged in attack. The squad depth was rather extraordinary relative to the nation's size, and Zlatko Dalic's team, infused with fresh blood, justified bold predictions and claimed their second consecutive World Cup medal by coming third.

Eighteen months on, the picture is nowhere near as promising. With the exception of Gvardiol, who proved to be a beast, none of the main players raised their game. A few have actively regressed. Josip Sutalo and Borna Sosa, expected to become new defensive stalwarts, have struggled badly amid Ajax's Eredivisie malaise this season, plus talk of the former being homesick. Gvardiol's hybrid role at Manchester City can't be replicated and confusion surrounds whether he'll play at centre-back or left-back.

Modric's age (38) is starting to show, and Marcelo Brozovic's lack of genuine challenges since last summer's move

WHO'S TO SAY THE CROATIA JIGSAW WON'T FALL INTO PLACE ONCE AGAIN?

to Saudi Arabia is a worry. Ivan Perisic, whose importance over the years can compare only to that of Modric, is on his way back from ACL surgery; he's 35 and left Tottenham in January to rejoin boyhood club Hajduk Split.

Dalic has worked wonders with this team, but the task here is much more demanding than the one he faced in Qatar. It isn't even that the golden generation has overstayed its welcome on the big stage: seasoned veterans Modric, Brozovic and Perisic are revered and undisputed starters, as are both Mateo Kovacic and Andrej Kramaric, with nearly 600 caps shared between the five of them. The real issue is that there are just too many uncertainties regarding too many players, and that doesn't bode particularly well for the team's tournament prospects.

For all that, though, remember that this is Croatia and they have outdone themselves so many times in the past, especially when it mattered most.

Who's to say the jigsaw won't fall into place once again?

Words Alex Holiga



FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Livakovic
RB Juranovic
CB Sutalo
CB Gvardiol
LB Sosa
CM Modric
CM Brozovic
CM Kovacic
RW Kramaric
CF Budimir
LW Perisic

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 15, Spain
Berlin, 5pm
June 19, Albania
Hamburg, 2pm
June 24, Italy
Leipzig, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Egypt (A) 4-2
vs Tunisia (N) 0-0
vs Armenia (H) 1-0
vs Latvia (A) 2-0
vs Wales (A) 1-2
vs Turkey (H) 0-1

EUROS RECORD
Joined FIFA in 1992
1996 QF
2000 DNQ
2004 Group
2008 QF
2012 Group
2016 Last 16
2020 Last 16

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

None, as per. In a winnable group, the Vatreni's qualifying games were torpid encounters and they limped through as runners-up. They scored just 13 goals in eight matches – seven of those past an abject Latvia – and took only one point off Wales, also losing at home to Turkey. But this is Croatia: you can't judge them by games against similar or inferior opponents because they're at their best when they're underdogs, usually fuelled by a mix of perceived injustice and disrespect, however imaginary. Last year they reached the UEFA Nations League final against Spain and then took them to a penalty shootout, which is a fine feat in itself.



THE MANAGER

Despite enjoying unprecedented success since 2017, **Zlatko Dalic** has never been universally liked. Some Croatia fans resent his links with right-wing politics; others feel he could have done considerably more to ease tensions in the overly tribal domestic club divide. This is probably the 57-year-old's last major tournament as head coach.



STRENGTHS

The Brozovic-Modric-Kovacic midfield, with its combined age of 99 when the tournament kicks off, is *The Godfather: Part II* sequel exception that comes close to topping the original featuring retired Don Ivan Rakitic. That talented trio represent the side's heart and soul; they're proven winners and mentality monsters, whose refusal to give up has secured enough silverware to fill the treasury of a medium-sized nation.

WEAKNESSES

A lack of firepower. Croatia's striking options are Ante Budimir (a 32-year-old Osasuna forward with a paltry two international efforts, although one of them sealed the 1-0 win over Armenia that clinched qualification), Dinamo Zagreb's moody Bruno Petkovic and 32-year-old Andrej Kramaric, who doesn't play up front for Hoffenheim. There aren't any true right-wingers, and both options on the left, Perisic and Mislav Orsic, missed almost the entire season due to injuries. Where are goals going to come from, then?



STAR PLAYER

It is, of course, **Luka Modric**, in case you had any doubts. The Real Madrid maestro has been a Croatia mainstay for almost two decades, and the way they play is still pretty much tailored to his talents, needs and increasing inability to do any running whatsoever. The captain may be nearing 40, but he's never fallen short for the national team.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Progress to the latter stages by neither outscoring nor outplaying anybody. Johan Cruyff's old maxim, "They can't beat you, but you can definitely lose to them", rings true of Croatia. In Qatar, Dalic's men reached the semi-finals by winning just one of their five games in 90 minutes – against a green-around-the-ears Canada – and creating a total of three 'big chances' against Morocco, Belgium, Japan and Brazil, while their opponents racked up 18. A bit like life, the Vatreni somehow manage to find a way. Dr Ian Malcolm would be proud.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Uncover a new young star. This is an old team on a mission – no room for unproven kids, thank you very much.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A swansong for the Modric generation. Miraculously at their best again, Croatia go all the way to Berlin and finally lift a trophy to ensure a Hollywood ending.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

The quarter-finals at best, or perhaps a last-16 loss to Belgium. Croatia may have ridden their luck for long enough. Plus, despite reaching two World Cup semi-finals and a final, they've never actually won a Euros knockout match.

GROUP C








FIXTURES

All UK game times

Sunday, June 16
5pm: Slovenia vs Denmark (ITV)
8pm: Serbia vs England (BBC)

Thursday, June 20
2pm: Slovenia vs Serbia (ITV)
5pm: Denmark vs England (BBC)

Tuesday, June 25
8pm: England vs Slovenia (ITV)
8pm: Denmark vs Serbia (ITV)

DENMARK

ENGLAND

SERBIA

SLOVENIA



DENMARK



Popular underdogs already following 1992 and all that, Denmark were the darlings of Euro 2020, too.

That the Danes made the semi-finals having lost their first two games, while also dealing emotionally with Christian Eriksen's on-field collapse, was nothing short of extraordinary.

They will enjoy lots of neutral support here as a result, but will those fans be disappointed? The Danish Dynamite's disastrous 2022 World Cup campaign raises questions of this squad's quality.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Feed the forward. Manchester United's Rasmus Hojlund (left) hit seven goals, including five in his first two games, to highlight his international prowess, but the Danes' limited displays in a weak group didn't inspire optimism. Defeats to Kazakhstan (having led 2-0 after 73 minutes) and Northern Ireland (2-0, to finish with a whimper) don't bode well.

STRENGTHS

Team spirit – never better shown than the Eriksen episode – and, in Kasper Hjulmand, a manager popular among supporters, players and press alike. There's an abundance of tournament experience, plus a solid, stable line-up of tactically attuned players who are comfortable in either a 4-3-3 or 3-5-2.

WEAKNESSES

Struggling, past-their-best stalwarts. Eriksen has slid down the Old Trafford pecking order, Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg no longer starts for Tottenham, Thomas Delaney has suffered injuries, captain Simon Kjaer is 35 and gloveman Kasper Schmeichel 37. Each underperformed in Qatar and things haven't improved since, but no top-class replacements are available. March's goalless draw at home to Switzerland and 2-0 win over the mighty Faroe Islands said as much.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Bring plenty of colourful, friendly and beer-guzzling fans across the border.

EURO 2024'S SINGLE SCANDINAVIAN SIDE WANT TO MAKE THEIR NEIGHBOURS JEALOUS



THE MANAGER

His surname meaning 'wheelman', nominative determinism's **Kasper Hjulmand** showed fine leadership at Euro 2020. Since delivering a first title for Nordsjaelland, famous for their academy, he has promoted skilled youngsters such as Rasmus Hojlund, but Denmark's World Cup hangover – two defeats, one draw, one goal – could be difficult to cure.



STAR PLAYER

Christian Eriksen is still Denmark's most imaginative player. Likely to have overtaken Peter Schmeichel as the second-most-capped Dane by tournament kick-off, the gifted midfielder has also scored nearly as many goals as the rest of the squad combined. The 32-year-old's club form is poor, though – might Denmark fare better without him?

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 16, Slovenia
Stuttgart, 5pm
June 20, England
Frankfurt, 5pm
June 25, Serbia
Munich, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Faroe Islands (H) 2-0
vs Switzerland (H) 0-0
vs Northern Ireland (A) 0-2
vs Slovenia (H) 2-1
vs San Marino (A) 2-1
vs Kazakhstan (H) 3-1

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNQ	**1992** Winners
1964 SF	**1996** Group
1968 DNQ	**2000** Group
1972 DNQ	**2004** QF
1976 DNQ	**2008** DNQ
1980 DNQ	**2012** Group
1984 SF	**2016** DNQ
1988 Group	**2020** SF

LEAST LIKELY TO...

See Mikkel Damsgaard score. By April, the Brentford midfielder's last strike for club or country was that semi-final free-kick against England in July 2021.

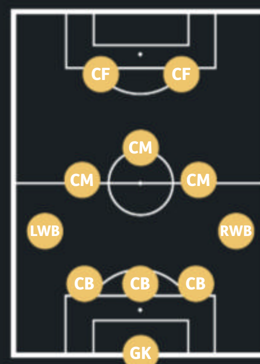
WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

As the only Scandinavian team going to Germany, the Danes would love to make their neighbours really jealous by reaching another Euros showpiece.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

The absent Scandis will snigger as the Danes get dumped out in the last 16.

FORMATION 3-5-2



PREDICTED XI

GK Schmeichel
CB Andersen
CB Kjaer
CB Vestergaard
RWB Maehle
CM Christensen
CM Eriksen
CM Hojbjerg
LWB Kristiansen
CF Wind
CF Hojlund

Words Michael Yokhin



ENGLAND

If not now, when? And if not Gareth, whom? England travel to Germany as joint-favourites (with France) to lift their first major trophy in nearly 60 years, acutely aware that this summer represents a final shot at Euros glory for many of the party.

Though Southgate has refused to be drawn on his post-tournament plans, many of the manager's favourites will be 30-plus by kick-off. Jordan Pickford, Harry Maguire, Harry Kane, Kyle Walker, Kieran Trippier, Jordan Henderson and John Stones may feel it's now or never in terms of lifting the Henri Delaunay Trophy. That septet all started against Croatia in the 2018 World Cup semi-final, all featured against Italy in the Euro 2020 Final and, unused substitute Trippier aside, all fell against France in the Qatar quarters. Fourth time lucky?

Fortunately, a formidable group of younger talents share their ambition, from the marauding midfield presence of Declan Rice to the epic end product of Bukayo Saka (above, left) and Phil Foden's ethereal genius. Yet the Three Lions' most dazzling gem is 20-year-old world-beater Jude Bellingham, who defied all reasonable expectation in becoming Real Madrid's key player and de facto leader in his maiden season after joining from Borussia Dortmund.

There's sizeable strength in depth in attack, with Marcus Rashford, James Maddison, Cole Palmer, Ollie Watkins, Jack Grealish, Anthony Gordon and even Jarrod Bowen all very capable of stepping in if required. More than one won't even be on the plane.

IF ENGLAND PLAY TO THEIR CONSIDERABLE STRENGTHS, FOOTBALL MAY BE COMING HOME

With such talent at his disposal (now including 18-year-old Kobbie Mainoo, who excelled on debut and may start), Southgate will inevitably find himself castigated by some fans for refusing to field all of them at once. But the former defender's belief that clean sheets win tournaments has made him England's most successful manager since Sir Alf Ramsey, so defenestrating his tactical blueprint this late is unthinkable.

Expect this Three Lions line-up to be stubborn over spectacular, especially in the knockout ties, and flexible enough to switch to a back three against top-class opposition. In talismanic captain Kane (above, right), who found his feet quickly at Bayern Munich, England have a focal point who makes the most of meagre opportunities.

An injury to Kane, Rice or Bellingham would spark widespread panic, but if England can avoid disaster and play to their considerable strengths, football may be coming home at last.

Words Ed McCambridge



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 16, Serbia
Gelsenkirchen, 8pm
June 20, Denmark
Frankfurt, 5pm
June 25, Slovenia
Cologne, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Belgium (H) 2-2
vs Brazil (H) 0-1
vs North Macedonia (A) 1-1
vs Malta (H) 2-0
vs Italy (H) 3-1
vs Australia (H) 1-0

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNE	**1992** Group
1964 DNQ	**1996** SF
1968 SF	**2000** Group
1972 DNQ	**2004** QF
1976 DNQ	**2008** DNQ
1980 Group	**2012** QF
1984 DNQ	**2016** Last 16
1988 Group	**2020** Finalists

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Mainoo's sudden emergence and Trent Alexander-Arnold's man-of-the-match midfield display against Malta have given Southgate a selection headache. Both have the vision and engine to run a game from deep, but is the Jordan Henderson fanboy courageous enough to unleash either? Though only France, Spain and Portugal outscored England in qualifying, the 1-0 friendly defeat to Brazil and draw against Belgium, with Ivan Toney sneaking ahead of Watkins after a decent showing, proved how thankless it is to be Kane's understudy.

FORMATION 4-2-3-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Pickford	**DM** Rice
RB Walker	**RW** Saka
CB Stones	**AM** Bellingham
CB Maguire	**LW** Foden
LB Shaw	**CF** Kane
DM Mainoo	



STRENGTHS

Experience and familiarity. England's goalkeeper and most of the backline have featured at the last trio of major tournaments, and their constellation of midfielders and forwards have played together on countless occasions. The group is supportive, settled and seems to love spending time together, even welcoming up-and-coming new faces – a far cry from previous eras' nods, cliques and sewing circles of mistrust.

WEAKNESSES

Defensive depth. Right-footed Trippier has often had to play at left-back with injuries to Luke Shaw and Ben Chilwell, and the unavailability of any of Stones, Rice and, yes, Maguire would be a big blow to Southgate. The gaffer's loyalty to 31-year-old Maguire, at the expense of grooming a younger, more mobile alternative, remains a hill on which he is prepared to die. Pickford's mistake against Belgium is also a slight worry.



THE MANAGER

Despite the ire of the unshakably anti-**Gareth Southgate** minority, the raw statistics don't lie. The 53-year-old has more victories at major tournaments (12, including shootouts) than any other England gaffer, and his half-dozen knockout wins equal the nation's total across the previous 48 years. Don't let that colour your judgement, though...



STAR PLAYER

Not since the days of early '90s Paul Gascoigne have England had a game-bossing midfielder like **Jude Bellingham**. The Brummie is a Swiss Army knife player, as happy crunching into tackles and dictating play from deep as he is dribbling past defenders to score vital goals in the style of Zinedine Zidane at his peak. He's that good.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Proclaim continental dominance with Boxpark beer showers and lit rectal flares... after an unconvincing 1-0 win against Serbia in the first group game.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Convert from 12 yards. The Three Lions' penalty hoodoo was supposedly put to bed after the 2018 World Cup's victory over Colombia, but further heartbreak against Italy in the Euro 2020 Final and Kane's ballooned effort against France two summers ago tell a different story.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A kneeling Southgate, winners' medal dangling over a fitted M&S waistcoat, is knighted on the Buckingham Palace steps by a rosy-cheeked King Charles. New England supremo Pep Guardiola announces his humble ambition to try to build on his predecessor's success.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

A spirited semi-final exit, inevitably on penalties. Southgate vows to stay on for one last World Cup, to widespread grumbling from fans claiming England would be European champions if only Grealish had started every single game.



SERBIA



Serbia have qualified for three of the last four World Cup finals, so it's a quirk that this is the team's first outing at a European Championship since Montenegrin independence.

After a less than assured qualifying campaign, however, Dragan Stojkovic's men head to Germany with less hope and enthusiasm than they did to Qatar in 2022. That tournament highlighted everything this unit lacks – an ability to hold onto leads, chief among them.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

That they're far from their scintillating displays of 2021. That year, the Eagles topped their qualifying group ahead of Portugal; this time, they defeated only Montenegro and lowly Lithuania, lost twice to Hungary and barely snatched a pair of late draws with rock-bottom Bulgaria. The side looked defensively sloppy and missed stability throughout, as Stojkovic's aura steadily diminished.

STRENGTHS

Such attacking depth that €70 million Juventus forward Dusan Vlahovic (left, centre) has to accept a place on the bench as understudy to vice-captain Aleksandar Mitrovic. Skipper Dusan Tadic makes the team tick and Sergej Milinkovic-Savic provides leggy gas. Unexpectedly, Serbia also have options in goal: Chelsea's Djordje Petrovic is vying for the starting spot with Predrag Rajkovic – very reliable for Mallorca all season – and Vanja Milinkovic-Savic, who was Serbia's No.1 in qualifying and is part of a stubborn Torino resistance.

WEAKNESSES

Anything remotely to do with defence. Stojkovic, unsure about implementing a vulnerable three-man backline, tried a flat four against Russia in March's friendly and Serbia were thumped 4-0. Little has progressed since the World Cup, when the same group of players led Cameroon 3-1 and Switzerland 2-1 but soon fell to pieces, drawing the first game 3-3 and losing the second 3-2.

> THE 2022 WORLD CUP SERVED TO HIGHLIGHT ALL THE THINGS THIS SERBIA SQUAD LACKS



THE MANAGER

Before the last World Cup, **Dragan Stojkovic** was a national treasure leading a thrilling new generation. Two years on, the former midfield conductor is under significantly more scrutiny as his team haven't improved in any department. The 59-year-old continues to lean on charisma over tactics; sceptics are now questioning if that's sufficient.



STAR PLAYER

Once a fiery youngster, now a fiery 29-year-old, **Aleksandar Mitrovic** delights fans by displaying fighting spirit and a decisive ability in front of goal, helped by his link-ups with two talented playmakers behind him. Serbia's greatest goalscorer is still netting for fun, only in Saudi Arabia, and he'll be *very* motivated to prove himself against England.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 16, England
Gelsenkirchen, 8pm
June 20, Slovenia
Munich, 2pm
June 25, Denmark
Munich, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Cyprus (A) 1-0
vs Russia (A) 0-4
vs Bulgaria (H) 2-2
vs Belgium (A) 0-1
vs Montenegro (H) 3-1
vs Hungary (A) 1-2

EUROS RECORD*

1960 Finalists	**1992** Banned
1964 DNQ	**1996** Banned
1968 Finalists	**2000** QF
1972 DNQ	**2004** DNQ
1976 SF	**2008** DNQ
1980 DNQ	**2012** DNQ
1984 Group	**2016** DNQ
1988 DNQ	**2020** DNQ

*1960-1992 as Yugoslavia; 1996-2000 as FR Yugoslavia; 2004 as Serbia and Montenegro

MOST LIKELY TO...

Talk up their chances before imploding on the big stage. Every. Single. Time.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Be dull. They were top scorers in their Qatar 2022 group and still came last.

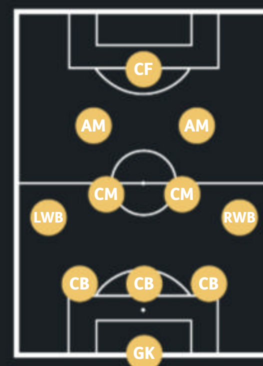
WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Reaching the last 16 allows them to be the underdog in the knockouts, which is when the Eagles are most dangerous.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Third in Group C; last 16 if they're lucky.

FORMATION 3-4-2-1



PREDICTED XI

GK V. Milinkovic-Savic
CB Milenkovic
CB Veljkovic
CB Pavlovic
RWB Zivkovic
CM Lukic
CM Gudelj
LWB Kostic
AM S. M'-Savic
AM Tadic
CF A. Mitrovic

Words Michael Yokhin



SLOVENIA



In Slovenia's first appearance at the Euros, in 2000, they put on one of the tournament's best ever group-stage matches. With this new team set up well by a canny coach, they hope that their second showing could offer something even more special than the 3-3 draw against FR Yugoslavia.

Having been drawn to meet Serbia this summer, as well as qualifying rivals Denmark and their 2010 World Cup opponents England, they've nothing to lose from their first appearance at a major tournament in 14 years. Maybe they can earn themselves a nickname – Slovenia still await a suitable moniker, despite previous attempts to establish 'Kekci' during head coach Matjaz Kek's first spell in charge from 2007 to 2011.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Maintain their momentum. Sure, they had a kind draw, but Slovenia used to fail in similar circumstances; here, they defeated Finland, Northern Ireland and Kazakhstan when it really mattered – the latter, in the 86th minute of their final qualifier – and ultimately finished level on points with Denmark. Leipzig's 20-year-old forward Benjamin Sesko (left) proved he's capable of leading from the front by bagging five goals in qualifying, and 11 in his first 28 caps.

STRENGTHS

Togetherness. Veteran head coach Kek is a shrewd tactician, but above all he has created a united squad that feels like the entire country is behind them. It also helps to have one of the world's leading goalkeepers: Atletico Madrid's La Liga-winning Jan Oblak is a five-time Zamora Trophy recipient as Spain's best shot-stopper, possessing faster reflexes than your average 100-metre sprinter.

WEAKNESSES

Inexperience. That's to be expected at international tournaments but most of the players lack elite club exposure outside of Oblak and Sesko, their only top young prospect in a major league.

BENJAMIN SESKO, THE 20-YEAR-OLD LEIPZIG STRIKER, HAS PROVED THAT HE IS CAPABLE



THE MANAGER

Matjaz Kek guided Slovenia to the 2010 World Cup – where they were just minutes away from advancing to the last 16 – and he's an even bigger hero now. Widely respected and known as a superb motivator, the 62-year-old returned to take the reins of the national team for a second time in 2018 and could probably stay as long as he wants.



STAR PLAYER

Jan Oblak, still only 31, hadn't had the best of his 10 Atletico Madrid years until his Champions League shootout brilliance against Inter, though he remains an outstanding goalkeeper who deserves to star at an international tournament. With seven Slovenian Footballer of the Year gongs to his name since 2015, he's his nation's finest ever player.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 16, Denmark
Stuttgart, 5pm
June 20, Serbia
Munich, 2pm
June 25, England
Cologne, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Portugal (H) 2-0
vs Malta (A) 2-2
vs USA (A) 1-0
vs Kazakhstan (H) 2-1
vs Denmark (A) 1-2
vs Northern Ireland (A) 1-0

EUROS RECORD

Joined FIFA in 1992

1996 DNQ
2000 Group
2004 DNQ
2008 DNQ
2012 DNQ
2016 DNQ
2020 DNQ

MOST LIKELY TO...

Have games dominated by camera shots of UEFA president Aleksander Ceferin, born and bred in Ljubljana.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Offer entertainment on the pitch and scandals off it. Star of Euro 2000 Zlatko Zahovic was sent home from the 2002 World Cup after their opening match for scrapping with boss Srecko Katanec.

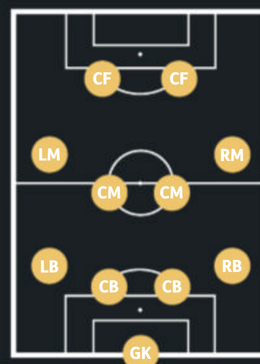
WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

That, for once, people won't confuse them with Slovakia.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

People confuse them with Slovakia.

FORMATION 4-4-2



PREDICTED XI

GK Oblak
RB Karnicnik
CB Bijol
CB Blazic
LB Janza
RM Stojanovic
CM Gnezda Cerin
CM Elsnik
LM Mlakar
CF Sporar
CF Sesko

Words Michael Yokhin

GROUP D






FIXTURES
All UK game times

Sunday, June 16
2pm: Poland vs Netherlands (BBC)

Monday, June 17
8pm: Austria vs France (ITV)

Friday, June 21
5pm: Poland vs Austria (ITV)
8pm: Netherlands vs France (BBC)

Tuesday, June 25
5pm: Netherlands vs Austria (BBC)
5pm: France vs Poland (BBC)

AUSTRIA
FRANCE
NETHERLANDS
POLAND



AUSTRIA





THE MANAGER

Ralf Rangnick, now 65, has always liked a top-to-bottom footballing system, and the OFB have afforded what Manchester United singularly didn't. The players identify with familiar methods from their clubs and the supporters are back onside after enjoying some attack-minded performances, following Austria's defensive dirge in decades gone by.



STAR PLAYER

Christoph Baumgartner will be Austria's focal point in Germany while David Alaba recovers from injury. The affable 24-year-old Leipzig creator was already a key figure at Euro 2020, and he has only become more versatile. The owner of international football's fastest ever goal is equally capable of a clever assist or classy finish.

After a chastening Euro 2016 as dark horses, Austria outperformed their humbler expectations at Euro 2020, reaching the last 16 by beating North Macedonia and Ukraine for their first tournament victories since Italia 90.

For Euro 2024, anticipation levels lie somewhere in the middle. Das Team qualified in a solid yet unspectacular manner with a strong collective crafted by manager Ralf Rangnick, albeit one beset by devastating ACL injuries to Sasa Kalajdzic and captain David Alaba.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Focus. Focus. Focus. Only Belgium took points off Austria in a qualification that yielded six wins from eight encounters; they did, though, play themselves into trouble. A wobble at home to Estonia left them needing a late winner, while a three-minute blackout against the Red Devils in Vienna saw them concede two goals in a 3-2 defeat. Most of their few wounds were actually self-inflicted.

STRENGTHS

Patience. When Austria qualified with a game to spare by beating Azerbaijan in October, 12 of the 15 goals they had scored up to that point had come after half-time. The squad has real belief in the game plan of *Gegenpressing* guru Rangnick (a 6-1 friendly shellacking of Turkey certainly helps) and they stick to it even if it doesn't pay immediate dividends. A couple more goals after six seconds – like Christoph Baumgartner's record-breaking strike against Slovakia in March – wouldn't go amiss, mind...

WEAKNESSES

Firepower. Baumgartner and former Manchester United midfielder Marcel Sabitzer carry a greater goal threat than the classic centre-forwards, with makeshift strikers often deployed in the absence of an out-and-out talisman. Marko Arnautovic, 35, still shines on his day, but without Kalajdzic, Freiburg's Michael Gregoritsch – the hat-trick hero against Turkey – has a lot on his plate.

AUSTRIA HAVE REAL BELIEF IN RANGNICK'S *GEGENPRESSING* GAME PLAN AND STICK TO IT

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 17, France
Dusseldorf, 8pm
June 21, Poland
Berlin, 5pm
June 25, Netherlands
Berlin, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Turkey (H) 6-1
vs Slovakia (A) 2-0
vs Germany (H) 2-0
vs Estonia (A) 2-0
vs Azerbaijan (A) 1-0
vs Belgium (H) 2-3

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNQ	**1992** DNQ
1964 DNQ	**1996** DNQ
1968 DNQ	**2000** DNQ
1972 DNQ	**2004** DNQ
1976 DNQ	**2008** Group
1980 DNQ	**2012** DNQ
1984 DNQ	**2016** Group
1988 DNQ	**2020** Last 16

MOST LIKELY TO...

Start with a natural midfielder up front.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Admit it's very good for a tournament when the host nation performs well.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A German coach helps to make Austria the most successful German-speaking side in a tournament held in Germany.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

A third-place finish in a tough group sneaks Austria into the last 16 again.

FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK A. Schlager
RB Posch
CB Danso
CB Lienhart
LB Mwene
CM Baumgartner
CM Seiwald
CM X. Schlager
RW Laimer
CF Gregoritsch
LW Sabitzer



FRANCE

Can a side that has reached the last two World Cup finals, winning one, really have enough motivation to lift the lesser of the two major trophies for which they compete? Oh you bet.

France and the Euros have plenty of unfinished business. As 2016 hosts, their hopes of wild celebrations on the Champs-Elysees were dashed when Eder (zero goals in 15 Swansea outings that season) smashed a soul-crushing winner for Portugal in extra time of the Stade de France showpiece. The pain of three years ago was just as acute: with nine minutes remaining, France let slip a 3-1 advantage against Switzerland in the last 16 and exited on penalties to a team who hadn't won a knockout tie at a major tournament since 1938.

However, recent disappointments may represent no more than a lovers' tiff in the context of France's long-standing affair with the Henri Delaunay Trophy. On home soil at Euro 84, an elegant, swashbuckling Michel Platini-inspired side vanquished all-comers, delivering Les Bleus' first major trophy in unforgettable fashion. Sixteen years later, at Euro 2000, Zinedine Zidane's laconic brilliance added European gold to their world domination as hosts in 1998. What better way to renew their vows than by producing a repeat, only with new captain Kylian Mbappe as the on-pitch maestro?

Manager Didier Deschamps – captain of the European champions in 2000 – prizes stability, so his squad selection

DESCHAMPS AND HIS PLAYERS WILL SHRUG OFF ALL CRITICISM OF THE PRAGMATIC STYLE

will contain little surprises. As many as 19 of the party may have travelled to Qatar 18 months ago when France were a spread-eagled Emi Martinez and couple of penalties from retaining their world crown.

He retains the base 4-3-3 formation that he favoured in the Middle East, but there have been some personnel changes since the shootout drama in Lusail. Goalkeeper Mike Maignan and centre-back Ibrahima Konate have stepped up to replace the retired duo of Hugo Lloris and Raphael Varane, while Marcus Thuram is knocking on the door up front. Does France's all-time top scorer, Olivier Giroud, have one last big tournament in him at 37?

The pure talent in France's ranks is sometimes exaggerated – how many of their players count as one of the world's top five in their positions, for example? – though they are European heavyweights and, as ever, genuine contenders. Motivated by the desire to erase some unpleasant memories, they'll be the side to beat in Germany.

Words James Eastham



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 17, Austria
Dusseldorf, 8pm
June 21, Netherlands
Leipzig, 8pm
June 25, Poland
Dortmund, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Chile (H) 3-2
vs Germany (H) 0-2
vs Greece (A) 2-2
vs Gibraltar (H) 14-0
vs Scotland (H) 4-1
vs Netherlands (A) 2-1

EUROS RECORD

1960 SF	**1992** Group
1964 DNQ	**1996** SF
1968 DNQ	**2000 Winners**
1972 DNQ	**2004** QF
1976 DNQ	**2008** Group
1980 DNQ	**2012** QF
1984 Winners	**2016** Finalists
1988 DNQ	**2020** Last 16



LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

France are – *quelle surprise!* – bloody good. They topped Group B ahead of the Netherlands, Greece and Republic of Ireland, and their W7 D1 L0 record put them second behind only Portugal among all qualified teams. They also displayed a ruthless streak: the 14-0 mauling of Gibraltar in Nice six months ago was Les Bleus' biggest ever victory.

STRENGTHS

In several positions there is no drop-off in standard from first to second choice, which could be crucial in later rounds. Like a nightclub bouncer, Deschamps can operate a one-in-one-out system at left-back (the Hernandez brothers) as well as in both centre-back slots, in two midfield berths and on the right wing without downgrading the team. Antoine Griezmann is irreplaceable, however. France's defeat to Germany in March, a second in six months, was not-so-coincidentally the first match they had played without the versatile Atletico Madrid forward since 2016.

WEAKNESSES

France lack an elite right-back. Where's Euro 84 legend Manuel Amoros when you need him? Jules Kounde is really a centre-half and has yet to impress internationally, while Jonathan Clauss has a great story – the 31-year-old made his professional debut shortly before turning 25 and his first ever top-flight appearance shortly before turning 28 – but is more comfortable as a wing-back. If there's one position where France can be got at, this is it.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Co-opt a hit from the dim or recent past and turn it into the squad's unofficial in-house anthem. During Qatar 2022, Gala's *Freed From Desire* was the latest to get the treatment. Clips of shirtless, hands-above-the-head warbling inside the dressing room *will* be going viral.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Listen to the sceptics. Expect whinging about Les Bleus' ultra-pragmatic, 'do just enough' style, but it won't matter a jot to players who, like their manager, value outcomes more than processes.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A celebratory dinner with Emmanuel Macron, late-night jigging around the Henri Delaunay Trophy and Griezmann showing off a hastily-sprayed *tricolor* hairstyle on the open-top bus parade.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Either they lose an all-time ripsnorter of a semi-final to England, prompting a prolonged introspection and clamour for Zizou, or, more likely, they exorcise ghosts from 2006 *and* 2016 by beating Portugal in a Berlin belter. *Incroyable!*

FORMATION 4-3-3



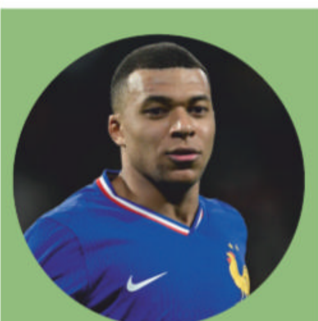
PREDICTED XI

GK Maignan	**CM** Griezmann
RB Clauss	**CM** Rabiot
CB Konate	**RW** Dembele
CB Upamecano	**CF** Giroud
LB L. Hernandez	**LW** Mbappe
DM Tchouameni	



THE MANAGER

Didier Deschamps hasn't lost his thirst to win since getting the gig in 2012. Underestimated in an era where data is the primary marker of excellence, his soft skills – player empowerment, communication and adaptability – suit tournament football. He could become the first man to be a European and world champion as a player and a coach.



STAR PLAYER

By **Kylian Mbappe**'s standards, the European Championship is almost a blot on his copybook, having so far fired four blanks and failed to convert the decisive penalty in the Swiss shootout. Expect maximum motivation from a 25-year-old with a laser-like focus on breaking records and already 46 goals from his first 77 France matches. Gulp.



NETHERLANDS

Ronald Koeman's youthful side are one to be taken seriously after last year's solid development. However, the former Everton and Barcelona boss has had to wade through some choppy waters since his second coming began in March 2023 with an inauspicious 4-0 defeat to France.

Yes, injuries and a virus that swept through the Netherlands squad – flu or a dodgy chicken curry, depending on who you believe – presented mitigation, but the rout made the Oranje's brave display in a World Cup quarter-final shootout exit to eventual champions Argentina, just a few months earlier, seem like the distant past. Absentees became a recurring issue, including in Nations League finals losses hosting Croatia and Italy last June, all resulting in a feeling that the Dutch were some way behind the very best.

Forced to adapt, Koeman welcomed several new players to the setup and started to tweak the system, rotating between the traditional Dutch 4-3-3 (albeit a tad less Total Football-centric) and a 3-5-2 armed with high-pressing wing-backs, subject to the opposition. Explosive Spurs centre-back Micky van de Ven, Feyenoord full-back Quilindschy Hartman and Milan midfielder Tijjani Reijnders have each made their debuts and impressed, giving Koeman plenty of options hopping across to Germany.

On the flipside, these are relatively rookie internationals severely short of experience and weeks spent working together, so the presence of wise old campaigners such as Virgil van Dijk, Marten de Roon and Wout Weghorst (above) is paramount – the former as an ever-present totem, the latter two likely as impact substitutes. With crucial goals against Greece and the Republic of Ireland in qualifying, that triumvirate proved their importance on the pitch and they can be critical in guiding a young group off it.

CONCEDING EARLY IS A WORRYING THEME, JUST AS IT WAS IN KOEMAN'S LAST STINT

There's an abundance of potential if everybody can stay fit, but it's a tricky balance because the Netherlands look much more vulnerable without certain key cogs. Last year, Memphis Depay and Frenkie de Jong amassed only six outings between them and the team had to find a more pragmatic way to win games deprived of their creators. Koeman deployed 38 players in 2023, considerably more than the 25 used in 2019 at the end of his first spell.

The Dutch possess courage and the belief to thrive. If Koeman can hone and fine-tune his squad's talent into a structure that works, they'll go deep.

Words Arthur Renard



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 16, Poland
Hamburg, 2pm
June 21, France
Leipzig, 8pm
June 25, Austria
Berlin, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs Germany (A) 1-2
vs Scotland (H) 4-0
vs Gibraltar (A) 6-0
vs Republic of Ireland (H) 1-0
vs Greece (A) 1-0
vs France (H) 1-2

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNE	**1992** SF
1964 DNQ	**1996** QF
1968 DNQ	**2000** SF
1972 DNQ	**2004** SF
1976 SF	**2008** QF
1980 Group	**2012** Group
1984 DNQ	**2016** DNQ
1988 Winners	**2020** Last 16



LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Switch on from the off. Four of the six goals that the Netherlands shipped in two reverses to group winners France came inside the opening 21 minutes of those games. It's hard to recover if you're 3-0 down with barely a quarter of the match gone – and guess who they face second in Leipzig? *Oui*. They also conceded inside six minutes to the Irish and to Italy, the latter in the Nations League. Worryingly, it was a theme during Koeman's initial stint as well, when the Dutch leaked first in a dozen of his 20 games in charge.

STRENGTHS

A defensive surplus is a definite plus. Van Dijk is still one of the world's best centre-halves, while Matthijs de Ligt, Nathan Ake and Stefan de Vrij are all proven at the highest level and Van de Ven has stood out in his first Premier League season at Tottenham. It's no different in the full-back or wing-back positions. Only Bruno Fernandes and Kylian Mbappe laid on more assists in qualifying than Denzel Dumfries' five, with Ian Maatsen, Bayer Leverkusen's Jeremie Frimpong and Hartman, who will probably get the nod on the left, providing wide attacking prowess, too.

WEAKNESSES

A lack of first-rate attackers. The Dutch were unusually deadly when they beat Scotland 4-0 in March, but immediately regressed to the mean in a 2-1 defeat to Germany. Depay has struggled to replicate his superb 2021 (notching 17 goals in 16 internationals), Cody Gakpo is streaky and Weghorst is... well, just ask any Manchester United supporter.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Mix up the systems, even in the same game. Koeman will alternate between a back three and 4-3-3, and calculated flexibility offers them their best chance of tournament triumph this summer.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Trust the Germans. Donyell Malen and Xavi Simons ripped up the Bundesliga for Borussia Dortmund and RB Leipzig respectively in 2023-24, but Koeman is yet to let them both fully off the leash.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A morale-boosting victory over France sends the Dutch through as Group D winners, and the ensuing momentum means that Koeman (along with older brother Erwin, his assistant) goes on to join Berti Vogts as the only man to win the Euros as a player and a manager.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Losing an eighth game in nine against Les Bleus knocks their confidence and they go out in either the last 16 or the quarter-finals – potentially to Portugal if it's the latter, their major tournament conquerors in 2004, 2006 and 2012.

FORMATION 3-5-2



PREDICTED XI

GK Verbruggen
CB De Ligt
CB Van Dijk
CB Ake
RWB Dumfries
CM De Jong
CM Veerman
CM Reijnders
LWB Hartman
CF Gakpo
CF Depay



THE MANAGER

Having departed his Dutch post four years ago, before the delayed Euro 2020, for an unhappy spell at Barcelona, **Ronald Koeman** is finally fulfilling his wish to coach at a major international tournament. He has tended to give opportunities to youngsters, including Gavi and Pedri at Barça, so could take this team far – but maybe not this year.



STAR PLAYER

Reports of **Virgil van Dijk**'s demise, following the cruciate ligament knee injury that cruelly denied the Liverpool and Netherlands skipper a crack at Euro 2020, have been greatly exaggerated. Aside from the resurgent 32-year-old's myriad defensive and leadership qualities, he continues to chip in with some big goals for both club and country.



POLAND



Poland's problem isn't in reaching European Championships – 2024 will be their fifth finals outing in a row, including as 2012 co-hosts alongside Ukraine – but in achieving anything remotely good once they get there.

They have won only two of 14 games in normal time over the previous four tournaments – both at Euro 2016 when they reached the last eight by beating Northern Ireland and Ukraine, then Switzerland on penalties. Poland have otherwise suffered group-stage exits, and something drastic would have to change if they are to avoid stinking out the gaff again in Germany this year.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

The Polish FA demanded a reset after dull and negative performances at the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, but picking dull and negative Fernando Santos as their manager proved a disastrous, if not unpredictable, error. The veteran Portuguese coach barely lasted nine months following losses to the Czech Republic, Moldova and Albania. After Michal Probierz succeeded Santos in September, Poland recovered to finish third in a weak group and sink Wales on penalties in the Cardiff play-off final.

STRENGTHS

A pair of world-class operators at either end of the pitch: Juventus' Wojciech Szczesny – Poland's darling in Wales – and Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski. The Poles are better organised under Probierz and also excel at the dark arts.

WEAKNESSES

Creativity and imagination have long been major issues, and the situation is even worse now that Lewandowski is displaying all of his 35 years. Against Wales, with Lewy often dropping deep to become an additional midfielder, the Eagles failed to record a single shot on target across 120 nervous minutes.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Be referred to as Welsh party-poopers.

POLAND NEED DRASTIC CHANGE TO PREVENT A FOURTH GROUP EXIT IN FIVE TOURNAMENTS



THE MANAGER

Michal Probierz is used to working with underdogs, having achieved his best results at 2009-10 Polish Cup-winning minnows Jagiellonia Bialystok. Promoted to the top job from the Under-21s after Fernando Santos' dismissal, the 51-year-old went unbeaten in his opening six games. "It's not about playing, but winning," he says of his solid style.



STAR PLAYER

Arguably the finest forward of his generation, **Robert Lewandowski** probably rivals Zbigniew Boniek as Poland's greatest ever player but he has never come close to starring at an international tournament. The rot began on home soil way back at Euro 2012. The Barcelona striker, who is 36 in August, may feel this is his last shot at making things right.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 16, Netherlands
Hamburg, 2pm
June 21, Austria
Berlin, 5pm
June 25, France
Dortmund, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Wales (A) 0-0 (5-4 pens)
vs Estonia (H) 5-1
vs Latvia (H) 2-0
vs Czech Republic (H) 1-1
vs Moldova (H) 1-1
vs Faroe Islands (A) 2-0

EUROS RECORD

1960	DNQ	**1992**	DNQ
1964	DNQ	**1996**	DNQ
1968	DNQ	**2000**	DNQ
1972	DNQ	**2004**	DNQ
1976	DNQ	**2008**	Group
1980	DNQ	**2012**	Group
1984	DNQ	**2016**	QF
1988	DNQ	**2020**	Group

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Hear commentators pronounce their names correctly, especially Szczesny. For the record, it's 'sh-chels-neh' (ish).

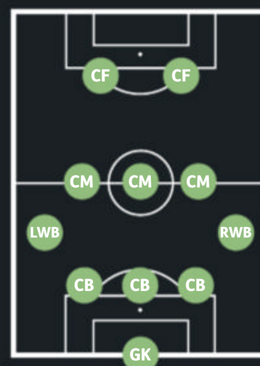
WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

They emulate the team that finished third on German soil at the 1974 World Cup, with Lewy lifting the Golden Boot just as Grzegorz Lato did 50 years ago.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

They emulate the team knocked out of their group on German soil at the 2006 World Cup, with Lewy faltering again.

FORMATION 3-5-2



PREDICTED XI

GK Szczesny
CB Bednarek
CB Dawidowicz
CB Kiwior
RWB Frankowski
CM Piotrowski
CM Slisz
CM Zielinski
LWB Zalewski
CF Swiderski
CF Lewandowski

Words Michael Yokhin

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GROUP E









FIXTURES

All UK game times

Monday, June 17
2pm: Romania vs Ukraine (BBC)
5pm: Belgium vs Slovakia (ITV)

Friday, June 21
2pm: Slovakia vs Ukraine (BBC)

Saturday, June 22
8pm: Belgium vs Romania (ITV)

Wednesday, June 26
5pm: Slovakia vs Romania (BBC)
5pm: Ukraine vs Belgium (BBC)

UKRAINE

BELGIUM

ROMANIA

SLOVAKIA



UKRAINE



More than two years on from the beginning of Russia's cruel invasion, occupation and extended state of war, Ukraine will participate in an event where football confirms its place as the most important of the least important things in life.

Having fallen at the final hurdle in 2022 World Cup qualifying, Ukraine came through the play-offs this time and motivation couldn't be higher for a talented squad. A fierce underdog determination has traditionally served sides well in European Championship history – could it do so again?

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Stay positive. Unlucky to be drawn with Euro 2020 finalists England and Italy, Ukraine missed out on automatic qualification only on the basis of their head-to-head record against the defending champions, having also had a strong penalty claim turned down in the last minute of their final-day draw with them. No matter: in the play-offs, consecutive come-from-behind 2-1 victories over Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iceland, finding a winner in the 88th and 84th minutes respectively, showed character, determination and an ability to deal with pressure. If anything, their group-stage draw for Euro 2024 itself is kinder than their one in qualifying.

STRENGTHS

Naturally there is a unity which hasn't always been present at tournaments, but there's also a balanced squad with players enjoying great seasons for top European clubs – Oleksandr Zinchenko at Arsenal, Viktor Tsyhankov and Artem Dovbyk for upstarts Girona, and Andriy Lunin a revelation in Real Madrid's goal.

WEAKNESSES

The fragile defence relies too heavily on Bournemouth's 21-year-old Illya Zabarnyi. In attack, they could have beaten England or Italy with a little more composure, so Dovbyk must replicate his Pichichi-chasing club form.

COMING FROM BEHIND TO WIN IN BOTH OF THEIR PLAY-OFF TIES SHOWED CHARACTER



THE MANAGER

Ukraine's coach at Euro 2020 was Andriy Shevchenko; now it's his strike partner in the Dynamo Kyiv team that reached the 1998-99 Champions League semi-finals. **Serhiy Rebrov** is still better-known as a player, but he has won league titles in Ukraine, Hungary and the UAE and has had a good first year managing the national side, too.



STAR PLAYER

The team don't have a standout 'star' per se, but **Heorhiy Sudakov** may be Ukraine's most important performer because a lot of their attacks go through his wonderfully textured feet. Shakhtar Donetsk's 21-year-old creative hub is a fine dribbler with magnificent vision and passing range – he'll be in high demand in the transfer window.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 17, Romania
Munich, 2pm
June 21, Slovakia
Dusseldorf, 2pm
June 26, Belgium
Stuttgart, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Iceland (N) 2-1
vs Bosnia-Herzegovina (A) 2-1
vs Italy (N) 0-0
vs Malta (A) 3-1
vs North Macedonia (N) 2-0
vs Italy (A) 1-2

EUROS RECORD

Joined FIFA in 1992

1996 DNQ
2000 DNQ
2004 DNQ
2008 DNQ
2012 Group
2016 Group
2020 QF

MOST LIKELY TO...

Be the most patriotic anthem singers at the tournament. *Slava Ukraini!*

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Respond to any questions in Russian.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

They better previous tournament-best quarter-final runs at Euro 2020 and at the 2006 World Cup, also in Germany.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Channelling March's momentum and stirred by motivation, those last-eight wishes could come true... although it may end in a thrashing again, as with the 4-0 by England three years ago.

FORMATION 4-2-3-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Lunin
RB Konoplya
CB Zabarnyi
CB Matviyenko
LB Mykolenko
DM Malinovskyi
DM Zinchenko
RW Tsyhankov
AM Sudakov
LW Mudryk
CF Dovbyk

Words Michael Yokhin



BELGIUM

This is Belgium 3.0 – neither the exhilarating side of the 2018 World Cup, nor the pale shadow of it at Euro 2020 and the 2022 World Cup, but a team in transition under a new manager and seeking to shed the skin of Belgium's golden generation.

Troubled by ailing players and intra-squad bickering, they departed Qatar through the backdoor due to the woodwork, obdurate Croatians and the profligacy of an unfit Romelu Lukaku. Roberto Martinez left and a flurry of retirements included Axel Witsel, Toby Alderweireld and Eden Hazard – their second, third and fourth most-capped men's players. Now, for the first time in a decade, Belgium enter a tournament without high expectations.

Strong ticket sales do still hint at a sense of cautious optimism, at least, re-energised by a kind Group E draw as well as some decent form. While Austria proved to be tricky opponents, Belgium breezed through qualification as they always do (their last defeat in World Cup or European Championship qualifying was nine years ago). More importantly, coach Domenico Tedesco – who at 38 years of age is 18 months older than centre-back mainstay Jan Vertonghen – put his trust in younger players like Everton's Amadou Onana and PSV wideman Johan Bakayoko.

Experience remains, though. Record appearance-maker Vertonghen will form the spine with Kevin De Bruyne in midfield and qualification's top scorer,

FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 10 YEARS, BELGIUM WILL PLAY WITHOUT HIGH EXPECTATIONS

Lukaku, up front. However, Thibaut Courtois – the world's best goalkeeper, as *FFT* is contractually obliged to call him or he'll throw his toys out of the pram again – withdrew from national team selection following a spat over the captaincy and is unlikely to recover from ACL surgery in time anyway.

Tedesco's team press ruthlessly, allowing their attackers to transition quickly, particularly Manchester City's Jeremy Doku when he is let off the leash. Their fortunes again rest on De Bruyne, who was disappointing at the last two major tournaments. He wasn't fit at Euro 2020 and Qatar 2022 was a collective breakdown, albeit one inspired, perhaps, by De Bruyne in the build-up labelling his own team "too old" to win the tournament. Still, the captain's excellence, if not his interpersonal skills, is never in doubt.

In only Tedesco's second game in March 2023, a barnstorming Belgium destroyed Germany. This summer, De Bruyne & Co will be out to prove that night in Cologne was no fluke.

Words Samindra Kunti



FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES
June 17, Slovakia
Frankfurt, 5pm
June 22, Romania
Cologne, 8pm
June 26, Ukraine
Stuttgart, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS
vs England (A) 2-2
vs Republic of Ireland (A) 0-0
vs Azerbaijan (H) 5-0
vs Serbia (H) 1-0
vs Sweden (H) 1-1 (abandoned HT)
vs Austria (A) 3-2

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNE	**1992** DNQ
1964 DNQ	**1996** DNQ
1968 DNQ	**2000** Group
1972 SF	**2004** DNQ
1976 DNQ	**2008** DNQ
1980 Finalists	**2012** DNQ
1984 Group	**2016** QF
1988 DNQ	**2020** QF



LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Trust the new blood – 5-0 thumpings of Azerbaijan and Estonia stand as a benchmark for a younger generation of Belgium players, so this tournament must provide them with the necessary experience. Qualifying campaigns are now just a victory procession, waltzing past minnows. It's time to take on the big boys, on the biggest stage, and win.

STRENGTHS

Whisper it, but some predict Slovakia could cause an opening-match upset. Nonsense, think the Belgians, whose strong record over the past decade of European Championship and World Cup qualifiers – P56 W46 D9 L1 – proves their mettle at dispatching second-tier opponents. The Red Devils would, however, do well to recall that Qatar 2022 featured a laboured 1-0 victory over Canada, a cataclysmic 2-0 defeat to Morocco and an insipid 0-0 draw with Croatia. Doku, Lukaku and De Bruyne will be seriously tested in the knockout stages; the last of that trio is world-class, the second – still officially a Chelsea player, remember – is at times, and the first has got the potential to be. What could go wrong?

WEAKNESSES

Vincent Kompany may have retired, but he'd still be as big of an asset to Belgium's backline as he would to his porous Burnley side's. His country have still not replaced their former captain's intelligence, stamina nor leadership. A veteran Vertonghen, held together by masking tape, muscle memory and vibes, anchors the backline adequately enough, but Arthur Theate and Wout Faes don't always inspire confidence.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Divide opinion, due to a Tintin-tinted blue, brown and white away strip. It's hard to picture Leandro Trossard – or any of the squad, for that matter – as Belgium's courageous cub reporter on some far-flung adventure with Snowy by their side. The baby-blue shirt could generously be called an acquired taste, though the Daisy Dukes' caught-short shade are unlikely to flog anywhere near as many units as the comic strip character's 200 million issues shifted.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Underestimate the opponent, or so you'd think after that humbling group-stage debacle in Qatar two years ago.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Top the group, shake the 'chokers' tag and enjoy the summer of a lifetime.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Win the group with some promising displays, navigate the last 16 and get a reality check in the last eight from the first major contender they meet.

FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Casteels
RB Castagne
CB Faes
CB Vertonghen
LB Theate
DM Onana
CM De Bruyne
CM Carrasco
RW Lukebakio
CF Lukaku
LW Trossard



THE MANAGER

Driven, dynamic and data-focused, **Domenico Tedesco** belongs to a generation of coaches who didn't play elite football, alongside Julian Nagelsmann and Thomas Tuchel, with whom he has worked closely. The German-Italian boss – indeed, his surname is Italian for 'German' – earned a contract extension by going unbeaten in his debut year.



STAR PLAYER

Kevin De Bruyne is the undisputed star after Eden Hazard's retirement. A Champions League winner at last, the playmaker, who turns 33 after the group stage, has fought back from a hamstring injury that meant his last Belgium cap came in March 2023 (a match-winning display in Germany, no less). He's in ominous form for Manchester City.



ROMANIA



Romania are at a major tournament for the first time since their entirely forgettable presence at Euro 2016.

Following a dismal 2022-23 Nations League – they were relegated behind a trio of teams who aren't in Germany this summer – the Tricolorii responded with impressive resolve to top their Euro 2024 qualifying group unbeaten. Resilience and team spirit have taken them this far, even if the 1990s flair of Messrs Hagi, Popescu, Petrescu et al is a long way in the rear view mirror.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Embrace the sacrifice. Romania won six matches and drew four, but the results don't show the full extent of their suffering: they scored twice in the final few minutes against both Switzerland and Kosovo to turn one point into four. Their best displays came in the last two matches, with the 2-1 defeat of Israel followed by a 1-0 win over Switzerland, in front of a febrile National Arena in Bucharest.

STRENGTHS

Smart defending. After relegation to Nations League C, manager Edward Iordanescu called up future Tottenham centre-back Radu Dragusin and the 22-year-old helped to install a rod of iron to a back four that claimed six clean sheets in qualifying, conceding only five goals in 10 encounters. They also have the knack of maximising their opportunities on the break, with captain Nicolae Stanciu capable on either wing or as a central playmaker.

WEAKNESSES

Effervescent they are not. Though excellent without the ball, Romania can be predictable with it and give away possession far too cheaply. They were dominated for large periods by Israel and Kosovo and needed two counter-attacks from nowhere to draw late on in Switzerland. March's friendly displays against Northern Ireland and Colombia showed little improvement.

> RESILIENCE HAS GOT ROMANIA THIS FAR, EVEN IF THEIR 1990S FLAIR IS NOW ABSENT



THE MANAGER

Edward Iordanescu, the son of legendary USA 94 quarter-final manager Anghel, has built a solid name in his own right by guiding a demoralised group to a major finals. The 45-year-old's cautious tactical approach and implacable faith in his squad have inspired belief to prove critics wrong and earned him plenty of plaudits.



STAR PLAYER

Captain **Nicolae Stanciu** is the engine that drives Romania on. The diminutive No.10 may be no Gheorghe Hagi, but he has enough attacking quality to at least inherit the Maradona of the Carpathians' number. A solid runner who is now with Damac in Saudi Arabia, the 31-year-old isn't afraid to attempt a dribble, tackle or long-range shot.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 17, Ukraine
Munich, 2pm
June 22, Belgium
Cologne, 8pm
June 26, Slovakia
Frankfurt, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Colombia (N) 2-3
vs Northern Ireland (H) 1-1
vs Switzerland (H) 1-0
vs Israel (N) 2-1
vs Andorra (H) 4-0
vs Belarus (N) 0-0

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNQ	**1992** DNQ
1964 DNQ	**1996** Group
1968 DNQ	**2000** QF
1972 DNQ	**2004** DNQ
1976 DNQ	**2008** Group
1980 DNQ	**2012** DNQ
1984 Group	**2016** Group
1988 DNQ	**2020** DNQ

MOST LIKELY TO...

Create an impression in the stands. Romanian supporters are eager to celebrate their international return.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Trouble the superpowers. Sure, they're brave, but there's still a long way to go before a return of their '90s glory days.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

The last 16 would represent success.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Plenty of fight, but a group-stage exit.

FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Moldovan
RB Ratiu
CB Dragusin
CB Burca
LB Bancu
DM Screciu
CM M. Marin
CM Stanciu
RW Man
CF Alibec
LW Dragus

Words Emanuel Rosu



SLOVAKIA



Qualifying for a third successive European Championship is no mean feat given how low the Falcons had been flying in recent years.

Ranked 36th in the world during the build-up to Euro 2020, Slovakia's subsequent relegation to Nations League C and poor 2022 World Cup qualifying campaign plunged them to the mid-50s by the time Francesco Calzona took charge in August 2022.

Drawn from pot five for Euro 2024 qualifying, along with such luminaries as Gibraltar, Latvia and Malta, they took confidence from an early 2-0 win against Bosnia-Herzegovina and made it to Germany with a match to spare.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Keep being pests. Slovakia are well set up and even 10-out-of-10 top dogs Portugal only recorded victories against them only by the odd goal. Going into June's pre-tournament friendlies, the Sokoli had lost just three games since September 2022: twice to Portugal and to Austria in March. Now they are eager to flourish on the major stage.

STRENGTHS

Tactical discipline. The squad's change in mentality and adaptability to boss Calzona's possession-based methods impress the most. Stalwarts Martin Dubravka, Milan Skriniar and Stanislav Lobotka face the elite every week at Newcastle, PSG and Napoli respectively – along with 100-cap veterans Peter Pekarik and Juraj Kucka, they're keen to help less experienced team-mates rise to the big occasion in Germany.

WEAKNESSES

Scoring goals. Robert Bozenik averages one every other game for club Boavista in Portugal, but has struggled for his country. Slovakia must become more clinical to reward their own hard graft.

MOST LIKELY TO...

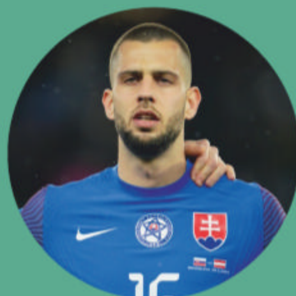
Sit deep, build patiently and, if their forwards click, strike at the right time.

THEY'RE WELL SET UP – ONLY 10-OUT-OF-10 PORTUGAL BEAT THIS TEAM IN QUALIFYING



THE MANAGER

After years in Italy as an assistant, **Francesco Calzona** has overcome initial scepticism to raise Slovakia's results better than anyone had hoped. The 55-year-old demands his teams build from the back and has won many admirers; in taking the Napoli job in February, he was the first Serie A manager to lead a foreign national side concurrently.



STAR PLAYER

David Hancko is an indispensable member of the Slovakian side. The left-footed, ball-playing centre-half fills in at full-back for the national team and complements the gritty Milan Skriniar inside. The 26-year-old defensive linchpin has been ace all season for Feyenoord and could be hot property this summer – Liverpool and PSG are interested.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 17, Belgium
Frankfurt, 5pm
June 21, Ukraine
Dusseldorf, 2pm
June 26, Romania
Frankfurt, 5pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Norway (A) 1-1
vs Austria (H) 0-2
vs Bosnia-Herzegovina (A) 2-1
vs Iceland (H) 4-2
vs Luxembourg (A) 1-0
vs Portugal (A) 2-3

EUROS RECORD

Gained independence in 1993

1996 DNQ
2000 DNQ
2004 DNQ
2008 DNQ
2012 DNQ
2016 Last 16
2020 Group

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Persuade the iconic Marek Hamsik out of retirement for a second time. The mohawk-loving midfielder answered an emergency call last June amid an injury crisis but, despite delivering an assist in victory over Iceland following a win against Liechtenstein, Slovakia's all-time leading scorer and appearance maker is now more than happy being a part of Calzona's backroom team.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Replicate Euro 2016's knockout surge.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

An ultimately unsuccessful scrap with Romania behind Ukraine and Belgium.

FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Dubravka
RB Pekarik
CB Vavro
CB Skriniar
LB Hancko
DM Lobotka
CM Duda
CM Kucka
RW Schranz
CF Bozenik
LW Haraslin

Words Martin Rendek

GROUP F






FIXTURES
All UK game times

Tuesday, June 18
5pm: Turkey vs Georgia (BBC)
8pm: Portugal vs Czech Republic (BBC)

Saturday, June 22
2pm: Georgia vs Czech Republic (BBC)
5pm: Turkey vs Portugal (ITV)

Wednesday, June 26
8pm: Georgia vs Portugal (ITV)
8pm: Czech Republic vs Turkey (ITV)

TURKEY
PORTUGAL
CZECH REPUBLIC
GEORGIA

TURKEY



Where do you start with Turkey, eh? Championed as potential Euro 2020 knockout upstarts, they fell apart spectacularly – three defeats, one goal scored, eight conceded – with an ensuing hangover that bled into dismal 2022 World Cup qualifying.

Early this year, the rejuvenated Crescent-Stars were again dark horses after topping a qualifying group ahead of fellow, better underdogs Croatia, and they even won 3-2 in Germany in a November friendly. Dress rehearsals don't come much better.

Cue two friendly defeats in March to Hungary (1-0, sub-optimal) and Austria (6-1, borderline apocalyptic). Hitherto well-regarded coach Vincenzo Montella faced fierce calls to resign. Now what?

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Get behind the Young Turks. Montella replaced Stefan Kuntz last September after an uninspiring start to qualifying and a 4-2 defeat to Japan. The 'Little Aeroplane' freshened the squad, if not always the starting XI, with a gaggle of youngsters and won 1-0 in Croatia on his dugout debut, then demolished Latvia 4-0 at home to seal the deal.

STRENGTHS

The same as it ever was: flair. Captain Hakan Calhanoglu, Inter's midfield creator, is the skilled technician looked up to by an exciting group. Luxuriously talented teens Can Uzun, Arda Guler and Kenan Yildiz (above left), who broke through at Juventus this term, should all make a squad well suited to Montella's high-pressing philosophy.

WEAKNESSES

The higher the expectations, the bigger the collapse. They must guard against a repeat of Euro 2020, with an opening game against just-happy-to-be-there Georgia being a potential banana skin.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Feel right at home. Numerous stars, including Calhanoglu, Yildiz and Salih Ozcan, are among those born and bred in Germany but representing their parents' homeland. The Turkish diaspora will provide huge support.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Avoid headlines: it's triumph or disaster.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Three Turks fight it out for the Young Player of the Tournament award.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

All of the young Turks win little more than splinters in backsides. Group exit.

THE HIGHER TURKEY'S EXPECTATIONS, THE BIGGER THE COLLAPSE FOR THEM RECENTLY

THE MANAGER



A decade ago, **Vincenzo Montella** was one of Italy's most promising coaches, but after turbulent spells at Milan, Sevilla and Fiorentina, he eventually cropped up at minnows Adana Demirspor in 2021. Finding a second home in Turkey having secured the Blue Lightnings' first European campaign, his popularity has nonetheless taken a hit of late.

STAR PLAYER



Hakan Calhanoglu claims to be the best deep-lying playmaker in the world. Arrogant, yes, but not necessarily wrong. Consistently superb with Inter atop Serie A for much of the season, he possesses a phenomenal passing range and always-dangerous set-pieces. At 30, he's in his prime and wants to triumph in the country of his birth.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 18, Georgia
Dortmund, 5pm
June 22, Portugal
Dortmund, 5pm
June 26, Czech Republic
Hamburg, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Austria (A) 1-6
vs Hungary (A) 0-1
vs Wales (A) 1-1
vs Germany (A) 3-2
vs Latvia (H) 4-0
vs Croatia (A) 1-0

EUROS RECORD

1960	DNQ	**1992**	DNQ
1964	DNQ	**1996**	Group
1968	DNQ	**2000**	QF
1972	DNQ	**2004**	DNQ
1976	DNQ	**2008**	SF
1980	DNQ	**2012**	DNQ
1984	DNQ	**2016**	Group
1988	DNQ	**2020**	Group

FORMATION 4-3-3



PREDICTED XI

GK Cakir
RB Celik
CB Kabak
CB Bardakci
LB Kadioglu
CM Yuksek
CM Calhanoglu
CM Ozcan
RW Kahveci
CF Baris Alper Yilmaz
LW Yildiz

Words Michael Yokhin



PORTUGAL

Portugal have a proud European Championship record, reaching the semi-final or better at four of the last six tournaments. Anything less this year would be a big letdown after a record-breaking qualifying phase in which, for the first time in their history, they won every fixture.

"Can we win it? Yes, we can," said ~~Bob the Builder~~ Roberto Martinez after their perfect 10. "We know the talent we have. But talent alone doesn't win games consistently. It's your attitude, commitment and clarity of thought."

There has been a real swagger under Martinez, with 36 goals scored and only two conceded in their 10 matches making Portugal both the most potent attack and the meanest defence in qualifying. The Spaniard has brought fresh ideas and tactical flexibility to the Selecao – they flit between a back four and 3-4-2-1 – and his team play inventive, enterprising football more suited to their naturally gifted players than the conservatism of Fernando Santos, his predecessor.

Bruno Fernandes has been the benefactor-in-chief. The Manchester United captain has become Portugal's main man, his 14 goal contributions (six goals, eight assists) in qualification bettered only by Romelu Lukaku and Kylian Mbappe. Twenty years on from his breakout international tournament, rejuvenated captain Cristiano Ronaldo (above) struck 10 goals to show he still has more to offer than lots of pointing.

PORTUGAL HAVE EVERY CHANCE OF ADDING TO THEIR IMPRESSIVE HISTORY THIS YEAR

If Portugal are to have a memorable tournament, however, they must build around a backbone of players thriving at Europe's biggest clubs: Joao Felix and Joao Cancelo at Barcelona, Ruben Dias and Bernardo Silva at Manchester City, Fernandes at Manchester United and Diogo Jota at Liverpool.

Despite a highly encouraging year, a traditionally pessimistic Portuguese fanbase still need convincing this team is the real deal. Martinez's charges are untested against top opposition and March's 2-0 friendly defeat to Slovenia was a worrying development. The feeling is that Portugal have had the ability to do far better than reach one quarter-final in their past three major tournaments, but lacked the grit and determination that characterised the less heralded individuals responsible for winning Euro 2016.

If Martinez can engender anything like that togetherness, Portugal have every chance of embellishing their impressive Euros history. Whatever the outcome, they'll be a fun watch.

Words Tom Kundert



FORMATION 4-4-2



PREDICTED XI

GK Diogo Costa	RM B. Silva
RB Cancelo	CM Fernandes
CB Antonio Silva	CM Palhinha
CB Ruben Dias	LM Leao
LB Nuno Mendes	CF Diogo Jota
	CF Ronaldo

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 18, Czech Republic
Leipzig, 8pm
June 22, Turkey
Dortmund, 5pm
June 26, Georgia
Gelsenkirchen, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Slovenia (A) 0-2
vs Sweden (H) 5-2
vs Iceland (H) 2-0
vs Liechtenstein (A) 2-0
vs Bosnia-Herzegovina (A) 5-0
vs Slovakia (H) 3-2

EUROS RECORD

1960 DNQ	**1992** DNQ
1964 DNQ	**1996** QF
1968 DNQ	**2000** SF
1972 DNQ	**2004** Finalists
1976 DNQ	**2008** QF
1980 DNQ	**2012** SF
1984 SF	**2016 Winners**
1988 DNQ	**2020** Last 16

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Feed the ego. After a generational stinker of a World Cup in which he fell out with the coach, had a negligible on-field contribution and – worst of all – had to watch Lionel Messi win the actual tournament, CR7 is firing again. Many in Portugal concluded the time was nigh for their greatest player, but Ronnie and Bobby thought otherwise. The new coach discovered a way to make the 39-year-old integral, and the forward duly responded by adding an extra 10 goals to his humongous all-time international record, some of which weren't even penalties or against Luxembourg or Liechtenstein.



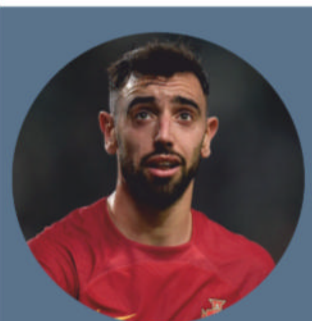
STRENGTHS

Multiple routes to goal and football maturity. Six players scored three or more in qualifying, with 11 different goalscorers in all. Martinez's biggest problem is getting as many of Ronaldo, Joao Felix, Rafael Leao, Goncalo Ramos (eight goals in his first 11 caps), Bruno Fernandes, Bernardo Silva and Diogo Jota in the team as he can. The latter three, plus Dias, Cancelo and Joao Palhinha, provide the core – all are in a footballer's 26-30 peak age bracket.



THE MANAGER

Roberto Martinez quickly made friends with his communication skills, but it is more than a charm offensive that has seduced local media and fans. The Spanish ex-Belgium boss has not been afraid to experiment with tactics or personnel, an increasingly cohesive outfit visibly improving. He turns 51 the day before the final, too...



STAR PLAYER

At a time when his club form has wavered, **Bruno Fernandes** has been consistently exceptional for his country. The 29-year-old is the Selecao's true leader and outshines both Bernardo Silva and Joao Felix, erstwhile pretenders to Cristiano Ronaldo's crown. Portugal need that game-changing creativity to continue if they want to go deep.

WEAKNESSES

Nobody questions the talent available to Portugal, but failure to reach the business end of tournaments since Euro 2016 speaks to an absence of the one attribute that team had in abundance: mental toughness. When things are going positively, Portugal are mesmerising, but they struggle to turn unfavourable situations around. The delicious 6-1 Swiss filling in an otherwise rotten World Cup sandwich of defeats to South Korea and Morocco proved as much. Puff out those chests.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Bicker. If you thought that Fernandes' habit of endlessly complaining on the pitch is confined to club football, think again. Oh, and just when you thought it was safe to go back in the water, Pepe continues to knock about at 41...

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Take themselves too seriously, at least in the case of the seriously talented Leao. The laid-back Milan wideman infuriates many, but criticism wanes when he's belting bangers into the top corner while beaming from ear to ear.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

A repeat of Euro 2016. Portugal have legitimate aspirations to win the thing.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Top their simple group and the Selecao won't take on a group winner until the semis, where the first heavyweight they face will likely be an undercooked Germany. They should reach the final.



CZECH REPUBLIC



Reaching an eighth Euros finals from eight attempts as the Czech Republic was the result of probably the most unpredictable qualifying campaign that the 1996 runners-up have had.

Their circuitous route to Germany began with a goal after 27 seconds in a fine 3-1 win over Poland, but it also featured a draw in Moldova and a 3-0 loss in Albania before the spectacular denouement. Less than half an hour after his side had beaten Moldova 3-0 to secure qualification, coach Jaroslav Silhavy resigned, citing the "anger and aggression" shown towards him. Ivan Hasek began in March with a pair of come-from-behind wins over Norway and Armenia, but he doesn't have much time to change the playing style that so irked his predecessor's critics.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Keep scoring first. The Czechs won four and drew one of the five clashes in which they took the lead. Just six goals conceded from eight games is a good return, albeit in a group that contained Moldova and the mighty Faroe Islands.

STRENGTHS

A disciplined defence, set-piece threat through captain Tomas Soucek (left) and the tactical flexibility to switch from a back four to a 3-4-3. Sexy it ain't, but it works. Having Patrik Schick fit again is a huge boost after his long absence: as David Marshall can attest, no goalkeeper is safe when the Bayer Leverkusen forward has the ball, even if it's on the halfway line. And look out for Sparta Prague's Mojmir Chytil, who could have an impact off the bench.

WEAKNESSES

They lack creativity in wide areas, and Hasek's preparation time amounts to two March friendlies and warm-ups against Malta and North Macedonia.

MOST LIKELY TO...

Promise a progressive style but instead prioritise pragmatism to secure points.

> JAROSLAV SILHAVY QUIT MINUTES AFTER QUALIFYING, CITING 'ANGER' TOWARD HIM



THE MANAGER

Ivan Hasek once won 55 caps as a player but he was a surprise pick as Jaroslav Silhavy's replacement, having spent the 15 years since his interim spell as Czech boss in 2009 coaching in the UAE, Qatar and the Lebanon national side, with limited returns. He's also a qualified lawyer and former FA president, so his man-management nous may help.



STAR PLAYER

Patrik Schick didn't play a minute in qualifying, being eased back to fitness in Bayer Leverkusen's stellar season, but the 28-year-old looks lethal after recurring groin injuries blighted the last two years. Czechs need his one-in-two international record to persist, plus the skill and magic he showed in scoring from halfway against Scotland in 2021.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 18, Portugal
Leipzig, 8pm
June 22, Georgia
Hamburg, 2pm
June 26, Turkey
Hamburg, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Armenia (H) 2-1
vs Norway (A) 2-1
vs Moldova (H) 3-0
vs Poland (A) 1-1
vs Faroe Islands (H) 1-0
vs Albania (A) 0-3

EUROS RECORD*

1960	SF	**1992**	DNQ
1964	DNQ	**1996**	Finalists
1968	DNQ	**2000**	Group
1972	DNQ	**2004**	SF
1976	Winners	**2008**	Group
1980	SF	**2012**	QF
1984	DNQ	**2016**	Group
1988	DNQ	**2020**	QF

*1960-1992 as Czechoslovakia

LEAST LIKELY TO...

Go out clubbing. Vladimir Coufal, Jakub Brabec and Jan Kuchta were axed after preparing for the do-or-die qualifier against Moldova by giving it large, but Coufal will probably return to the side.

WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Avoid a repeat of Euro 2016 when they had to beat Turkey in the final group game – and failed. Then channel 1996 or Panenka et al 20 years before that.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

Last 16 and out.

FORMATION 4-2-3-1



PREDICTED XI

GK Stanek
RB Coufal
CB Holes
CB Zima
LB D. Jurasek
CM M. Sadilek
CM Soucek
RW Doudera
AM Barak
LW Hlozek
CF Schick

Words Karel Haring



GEORGIA



Georgia is a football-mad nation. Even younger supporters from the Caucasus Mountains to the Black Sea can recite Dinamo Tbilisi's 1981 Cup Winners' Cup winners by heart. Their chances of success after Soviet independence were always seen as slim, however, and losing to North Macedonia in the Euro 2020 play-off final only crystallised that view.

Three years on, the Crusaders have reached their first major tournament, with an assist from a superb 2022-23 Nations League campaign, and it is impossible to put the locals' happiness into words. Yes, the demands placed on talismanic Napoli forward Khvicha Kvaratskhelia will be high, but earning a place in the European Championship finals is a remarkable feat in itself.

LESSON FROM QUALIFYING

Learn to lay a glove on the bigger boys. Georgia's only wins were against lowly Cyprus and they took two points from six meetings with Norway, Scotland and Spain, losing 7-1 at home to the latter. Better news came from topping their Nations League C group, taking revenge on North Macedonia – home and away – and beating Bulgaria 5-2 in Razgrad to canter into the Euro 2024 play-offs. Plenty deride the Nations League route, but Georgia displayed desire and self-belief by the bucketload to win on penalties against a Greece side who'd just drawn 2-2 with France.

STRENGTHS

Pride without pressure, plus talent at both ends of the pitch. Kvaratskhelia is world-class and averages a goal every other game for Georgia, while Giorgi Mamardashvili, 23, has shown at Valencia that he is one of Europe's most promising young goalkeepers.

WEAKNESSES

The rest of the squad has mostly been exposed to less testing environments, from Austria's top flight to second tiers in England, Spain, Italy and Germany.

> THE DEMANDS PLACED ON THE TALISMANIC KVARATSKHELIA THIS SUMMER WILL BE HIGH



THE MANAGER

Willy Sagnol featured prominently as France's right-back at Euro 2004 and Euro 2008 and played all of the 2006 World Cup Final in Germany, so he knows the score even if his players don't. A surprising choice in 2021, with Bordeaux (2014-16) his only previous managerial spell, he has delivered the dream assisted by former York gaffer David Webb.



STAR PLAYER

At just 23, **Khvicha Kvaratskhelia** is already Georgia's all-time most famous player beyond their own borders, partly because the world isn't familiar with the greats of the Soviet era. Spectacular in Napoli's historic scudetto triumph, he has been the sole positive of their poor title defence and his mesmeric dribbling should light up Euro 2024.

FORM AND FIXTURES

FIXTURES

June 18, Turkey
Dortmund, 5pm
June 22, Czech Republic
Hamburg, 2pm
June 26, Portugal
Gelsenkirchen, 8pm

LAST SIX RESULTS

vs Greece (H) 0-0 (4-2 pens)
vs Luxembourg (H) 2-0
vs Spain (A) 1-3
vs Scotland (H) 2-2
vs Cyprus (H) 4-0
vs Thailand (H) 8-0

EUROS RECORD

Joined FIFA in 1992

1996 DNQ
2000 DNQ
2004 DNQ
2008 DNQ
2012 DNQ
2016 DNQ
2020 DNQ

MOST LIKELY TO...

Be considered a one-man team, with Napoli's 'Kvaradona' in the spotlight.

LEAST LIKELY TO...

See their fans drinking a lot of beer in Germany – the Georgians prefer wine.

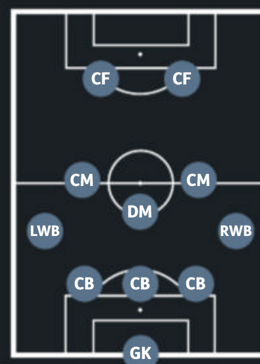
WHAT THEY HOPE WILL HAPPEN

Another famous triumph on German soil, as a tribute to Dinamo Tbilisi's aforementioned 1981 Cup Winners' Cup Final win against Carl Zeiss Jena in Dusseldorf. Group F isn't the toughest.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN

A draw in one encounter sends the fans home with something to cheer.

FORMATION 3-5-2



PREDICTED XI

GK Mamardashvili
CB Kvirkvelia
CB Kashia
CB Dvali
RWB Kakabadze
CM Chakvetadze
DM Kiteishvili
CM Kochorashvili
LWB Azarovi
FW Zivzivadze
FW Kvaratskhelia

EURO 2024: REVENGE OF THE MIFFED

At *FourFourTwo* we've predicted the whole tournament and it's dripping with narrative, including feisty rematches of the last two finals. And big guns, beware: we see a couple of last 16 shocks in your future

GROUP A	GROUP B	GROUP C	GROUP D	GROUP E	GROUP F
GERMANY	SPAIN	ENGLAND	FRANCE	BELGIUM	PORTUGAL
SCOTLAND	ITALY	DENMARK	NETHERLANDS	UKRAINE	CZECH REPUBLIC
HUNGARY (Q)	CROATIA (Q)	SERBIA (Q)	AUSTRIA (Q)	ROMANIA	TURKEY
SWITZERLAND	ALBANIA	SLOVENIA	POLAND	SLOVAKIA	GEORGIA

LAST 16

• Cologne •
SPAIN VS HUNGARY

• Frankfurt •
PORTUGAL VS SERBIA

• Munich •
BELGIUM VS CROATIA

• Dortmund •
GERMANY VS DENMARK

• Dusseldorf •
NETHERLANDS VS UKRAINE

•Leipzig •
FRANCE VS CZECH REP

• Gelsenkirchen •
ENGLAND VS AUSTRIA

• Berlin •
SCOTLAND VS ITALY

QUARTER-FINALS

• Stuttgart •
HUNGARY VS GERMANY

• Berlin •
BELGIUM VS FRANCE

•Hamburg •
PORTUGAL VS UKRAINE

• Dusseldorf •
ENGLAND VS ITALY

SEMI-FINALS

• Munich •
GERMANY VS PORTUGAL

• Dortmund •
FRANCE VS ENGLAND

FINAL

•Berlin •
PORTUGAL VS FRANCE









ALBANIA

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